

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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JACK HAWTHORNE

OF NO MANS LAND; OR, AN UNCROWNED KING.



"I said you were going to crawl, and now I'll prove it," he continued. "Get down on your hands and knees, and crawl for that door, or as surely as I am Jack Hawthorne, I'll have you carried out, feet first; crawl, I tell you!"

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Jack Hawthorne of No Man's Land

OR,

AN UNCROWNED KING.

By "NONAME."

CHAPTER I.

WASP'S NEST.

"I think I have the drop on you, Black Harry, but if you are not entirely convinced of the fact, just lower your hands a little and I'll prove it by laying you out cold!"

The words were uttered calmly, and yet with terrible distinctness, and they proceeded from a youth scarcely past eighteen, and were addressed to a big, swarthy ruffian, who was familiarly known as Black Harry, the pseudonym having in all probability originated from one of two reasons: his swarthy and forbidding complexion, or the still more sable condition of his character, which was black in the extreme.

The scene was one common in the region.

It took place in a little town in No Man's Land, a town which had received the suggestive name of Wasp's Nest.

A half dozen adobe shanties and a few lean-to's comprised the town, but being the only place of its kind within a large radius, it was a favorable region for cattle-tramps, maverick-men and toughs of all classes and descriptions.

Of the six adobe houses, five were saloons and gaming dens, while the sixth was the property of the young man whose remarks opened this chapter, and who was known far and wide through that region as Jack Hawthorne, of No Man's Land.

The picture presented was rather a startling one.

Imagine a large bar-room with several card tables arranged about it.

At the middle of one of the card tables, and therefore the most conspicuous, stood Jack Hawthorne of No Man's Land, with a self-cocking six-shooter held firmly in his extended right hand, the muzzle pointing directly at Black Harry's heart.

The dark-skinned ruffian was still seated in a chair, his head thrown back, and his arms extended at full length above his shoulders, while his face was convulsed with rage and baffled fury.

"Curse you," he muttered, "you young imp of Satan, but I'll be even with you for this, Jack Hawthorne!"

Jack laughed pleasantly.

"I have no doubt of it, Black Harry, if you ever get the chance," he said. "But if you want the opportunity to get

even, you have got to answer my questions, or I swear I'll let daylight through you as sure as my name is Jack Hawthorne, of No Man's Land."

A murmur of approbation went up from the group of a score or more of rough-looking men who had formed a ring around the table.

They evidently were well pleased with the spectacle.

And with good reason.

Black Harry had been the bully of the place for many months.

Big, muscular, fierce, devoid of conscience and heart, the suspected leader of a band of desperadoes who infested the region and who were constantly upon the lookout to seize for their own purposes the wealth which energetic persons succeeded in amassing; quick and expert with his weapons, many were the men who had gone down before his unerring aim and brutish and ruffianly bravado.

Punishment?

The word was unknown in No Man's Land.

A little strip of the Indian Territory, rightly named.

A harbor of refuge for the criminal, a region where crimes innumerable were committed daily without question.

A place where might made right; where the weaker inevitably fell before the stronger; where human life was accounted as nothing, and taken, or carelessly thrown away, with impunity.

Jack Hawthorne had been an inhabitant of the region for many years.

Indeed, his earliest recollection dated back to his childhood as a member of a family of Apache Indians, who had strayed from their tribe to finally settle there.

That he had been taken from a captured wagon train in his babyhood, his adopted Indian parents had told him, but that was all he knew regarding himself, except that his name was Jack Hawthorne.

How did he know that?

Simply enough.

An old hunter, who had learned how to read and write, had taught Jack the rudiments of these arts when a mere child, and he had never tired of perfecting himself in them.

He made the greatest sacrifices to get books and study, and

thus it was at the time we make his acquaintance he might be said to have attained what would be generally considered a fair education.

By some paradox of Indian nature the little dresses in which he was clothed when taken from the wagon train had been preserved, and upon each article was stamped the name of "Hawthorne," and upon his right arm, baby though he was, had been tattooed the words, "Little Jack."

Therefore, he was Jack Hawthorne without question.

But from whence came he?

Alas! he knew not.

Accordingly, with a smile of irony and as a perpetual sarcasm directed upon his fate, he had dubbed himself "Jack Hawthorne of No Man's Land."

"I owe allegiance to nobody—to no law," he had said once several years before. "Very well, I will force others to bow down to me. No Man's Land shall be mine in the sense that I will redeem it from the curse of crime, so far as I can."

He kept his word, and how well we shall see in the succeeding chapters of our story.

The moment he was strong enough to hold weapons in his hands, he began to study their uses, and his wonderful proficiency amounted almost to magic.

Indeed, many who knew him, and who had the shoots of superstition still sprouting in their ignorant hearts, said openly that he practiced black art, and was a veritable imp of the devil.

Of every known weapon he was a complete and perfect master.

With the revolver, even the quickest were slow when compared with him, and he would send a ball as unerringly from one position as another.

Jack was the only man in the region who never allowed a weapon to show upon his person.

To meet him upon the road one would suppose him to be unarmed, and yet, if the occasion required, he would stretch out his arms, while a six-shooter, small of size, but of large caliber, would seem to materialize in his grasp.

The report would follow instantaneously, and the missile, without any apparent effort upon Jack's part, would strike exactly upon the object he had intended, no matter how small.

He had been known upon one occasion to actually shoot a revolver out of the hands of a man who had "got the drop on him," effectually disarming his adversary with no injury being inflicted beyond a natural numbness of the hand and wrist, resulting from the sudden shock.

Where did he carry his weapons, that they were never seen until wanted, and then ever ready upon the instant?

Many had essayed to answer the question, but none had answered it satisfactorily.

In the wide, flowing sleeves of the gaudily trimmed buckskin jacket, which he wore?

Some thought so—others not.

Concealed among the feathers and gold braid with which the high crown and broad brim of his Mexican sombrero was made pleasing to the eye?

Again there was a difference of opinion.

Where then?

Did they grow out of his hands ready loaded at will?

Alas, for the credulity of the ignorant, many thought so, while others secretly feared it was so.

Of one thing they were all certain; when he had use for them they were ready, and the roughest of the rough had been taught through unpleasant experience to leave Jack Hawthorne alone.

He had never killed unless absolutely compelled to in order to save his own life, but his aim was so perfect, so sure that when molested he could "wing" his adversary, that is, disable him, without inflicting a fatal injury.

He never gambled, although he had proven that he could handle the cards with wonderful dexterity.

Once or twice when some wandering sport had arrived at Wasp's Nest and had succeeded in fleecing his victims, Jack had seated himself, and had in turn fleeced the sharper out of all his winnings, but only to return the money to those who had lost it upon condition that they would cease playing for gold or money.

That the promises were readily made and as readily broken, can easily be understood, although occasionally he would find one who did live up to his word.

To that one Jack would become very friendly and at last the former gambler would disappear from the saloons entirely, except for occasionally dropping in as a spectator.

Thus from time to time Jack had secured a considerable number of friends in this and other equally ingenious ways.

Some lived in the town, others were scattered about the surrounding neighborhood.

He had once friend, however, whom we must mention at once, for it was upon his account that Jack got the "drop" on Black Harry.

Some six months previous to the opening of our story, a young Apache Indian, not more than sixteen or eighteen years of age at the most, had wandered into the "Shouter," which was the name of the principal saloon in Wasp's Nest.

He was slight and handsome; lithe and evidently full of courage.

But he was far from home—and an Indian.

Being an Indian, and evidently a friendless one, he instantly became the butt of coarse jokes, rude remarks and rough usage.

Several times his eyes had flashed ominously, but he had controlled himself and was about to leave the saloon when he heard a sharp command to halt.

Turning, he saw the ruffian whom he knew as Black Harry standing near the bar, revolver in hand.

"Come 'ere, Injun!" ordered Black Harry, "an' hev a drink afore ye go."

"Me no drink fire water," replied the youth, in a voice singularly soft and firm.

"Come 'ere, I say!" continued the bully, "'er I'll hev ye brung on a stretcher!"

"Me no come," replied the youth, calmly and without moving.

"Ye won't, eigh?" cried Black Harry. "Then I'll bring ye!" and he took a step toward the young Indian, still holding his revolver pointed at his heart.

Grasping the youth by the arm, he dragged him toward the bar, amidst a loud guffaw from the spectators.

So interested were they all that no one saw Jack Hawthorne enter the room at that moment.

"Here, drink this, Injun," continued the ruffian, pushing a huge glass, filled to the brim with vile liquor, toward the youth.

"Ugh! Black face—coward!" said the young Apache, and with a sweep of his hand he dashed the glass and its contents to the floor.

An instant of surprise came over the scene, and then, with a yell of rage, Black Harry was about to leap upon the youth, when a sharp voice sounded like the crack of a whip through the room.

"Halt!"

They turned to see Jack Hawthorne standing in the doorway, and to realize that Black Harry's heart was covered by two weapons which never missed.

"Come here, boy," said Jack to the young Indian, who instantly obeyed, for he realized that he had found a friend.

Directing the youth to leave the room in advance of him, he backed through the door himself, saying mockingly as he closed it:

"Good-night, Harry dear!" and thus saying, he took his departure.

CHAPTER II.

PIERCING THE OUTLAW'S EARS.

The Indian youth had told Jack his story. He was harmless, and a wayfarer—an Apache Indian.

That he was an Apache was sufficient for Jack, for he remembered the kindness with which he had himself been treated by a family of Apaches.

The youth told Jack that he was nearly seventeen years old, and his name was Como.

It is needless to say that from that time forth Como made his home with Jack, and as the weeks flew past they became almost inseparable.

Como was rather slight and slender, and when compared with Jack's sturdy figure, he lacked muscle.

But he made up for it all in grace, suppleness, and quickness of motion, together with remarkable ready wit and thoughtfulness.

Thus six months had gone by.

But Black Harry had never forgiven nor forgotten the young Indian, and had been ever upon the watch for an opportunity to get even, as he expressed it.

Jack was as watchful as the outlaw, and had had forethought enough to foresee and foil the scoundrel's plans, until the time of the incident with which our story opens.

"Come," continued Jack pleasantly, "will you answer my questions, or not?"

"I can't answer 'em till I hear 'em, kin I?" retorted Black Harry.

"True enough," commented Jack, "so I will ask them."

"Well, go on, then."

"What have you done with Como?"

"Eh?" exclaimed the ruffian.

"You heard me, didn't you?"

"Who's Como?"

"You know very well who Como is; what have you done with him?"

"Ain't done nothin' with 'im; ain't seen him."

"Black Harry, you lie!"

The outlaw's eyes glittered savagely as he muttered between his teeth:

"It's easy enough to say such things as that when you've got the drop onto me, you young cur! Why don't you shoot me and have done with it?"

"I am about to do so," replied Jack calmly.

"Eh?" exclaimed Harry.

"I am going to shoot you now, you scoundrel, and I am going to keep on shooting you till you tell me where Como is, for I know that he is in your power."

"I know that you went to my door this morning when I was away, and made some pretext for calling him out, when one of your scoundrels lassoed him."

"So you see, Black Harry, you have got to tell me where he is, and I am going to shoot you till you do."

"The first shot will take off the lobe of your right ear, and if you still refuse to tell, off goes the left one."

"Now, once more, will you tell me?"

"I tell you I don't know nothin' about it."

"And I repeat that you lie!"

"Gentlemen," continued Jack, addressing those of the group who stood behind Black Harry's chair, "oblige me by stepping to one side."

They hastened to obey.

Black Harry, seeing that Jack meant what he said, then thought it wise to appeal to them.

"Say, pards," he cried, "air ye agoin' to stand there an' see this 'ere feller torture me like a redskin?"

"They will not interfere," said Jack, and his eyes swept rapidly over the group.

In that one glance he saw that he had as many friends there as had the outlaw.

"Will you answer my question?" he said again to Black Harry.

"I tell you, you devil, that I don't know nothin'——"

Bang!

One of Jack's revolvers had discharged, and at the same instant, with a yell of fury, the outlaw leaped to his feet, clasp- ing one hand to his right ear.

But the brave young fellow remained in his former position unmoved, immovable.

"The lobe of your right ear is gone," he said, coolly; "will you answer my question now?"

"Curse you!" groaned the outlaw, "curse you both!"

Bang!

Another yell of rage—another convulsive spring—and the outlaw's other hand flew to his left ear.

"I have pierced both ears," said Jack calmly; "next, off go their tops, if you still refuse to answer."

"Tell me, now—where is Como?"

"Wait, I'll tell," cried Black Harry, thoroughly cowed at last.

"Ah, your memory has returned. Very well, tell me."

"You'll quit shootin' off ears?"

"Yes, when I get the information I want."

"Well, the Injun is in a cabin up at Bed Rock."

"Is he unharmed?"

"Yes, at least he was when I left there about noon."

"Who was with him?"

"Nobody."

"He's alone, then?"

"That's wot I said."

"Why doesn't he escape?"

"'Cos he's wrapped up in a lariat so tight that Satan couldn't get out of it."

"And what were you going to do with him?"

"Nothin'"—sullenly.

"That is another lie, Harry, but I'll let it pass, for I don't care. I shall go up and get him out of your clutches."

"We'll go with you!" exclaimed several voices in the group.

"No, thanks," replied Jack. "I will go alone. It is moon- light, and I have only about twenty miles to travel. Stay here, boys, and keep your eyes on Black Harry while I am gone."

"Harry," he continued, again addressing the outlaw, "I am going now to get Como, and if you leave this room before I re- turn, I will kill you on sight. Do you understand me?"

"Well, ye said it purty plain."

"Exactly, and you know I do not make idle boasts."

"I repeat, if you are not here when I return, I will shoot you on sight; and if you are here and you have lied to me so that I do not find Como, I will kill you anyway."

"Oh, I'll be here, Jack Hawthorne, I'll be here and waiting for you, and I'll tell ye this now: You'll find your Injun all O. K., and you'll find me here all O. K., too, 'cos I'll be a-waitin' fur ye; an' when ye git back, ef ye've any sand, ye'll stan' up an' give me a good square fight where both on us kin have equal chances, an' ef I don't do you up fur piercin' my ears—why, I'm willin' ter die, that's all!"

"Bah!" exclaimed Jack, contemptuously. "who's talking about sand?—you haven't got any. Yes, I'll fight if you want to, and with any weapons you select."

Without another word Jack Hawthorne turned and left the saloon, while those who remained repaired to the bar to dis- cuss the event over their liquor.

All but two.

One of them was Black Harry, who went to a basin in one corner of the room to wash the blood from his face and ears.

The other was a heavy-bearded, villainous-looking fellow, who, having perceived a sign made by the wounded outlaw sauntered quietly toward the door, and watching his opportunity, when none of the others were looking, slipped out through the door and disappeared in the darkness.

As soon as he left the saloon he slipped around the corner and ran with all his speed to a point a few hundred feet distant where several horses were tied.

Hastily loosing one of them, he sprang into the saddle and started away at a rapid gallop southward.

He did not go in the direction of Bed Rock, but at right angles with it, gradually swinging his horse, until he was making for a point two or three miles south of that which was Jack Hawthorne's destination.

A few moments after he started away, Jack Hawthorne dashed past the saloon, mounted upon his beautiful black stallion, Lightning.

He took his course straight east, along the base of the foot hills, making a bee line for Bed Rock, where he had been told that he would find Como.

But Black Harry's friend had got fully ten minutes the start of him, and it boded no good for the success of his expedition.

But Jack Hawthorne of No Man's Land was ever upon the alert, even when he seemed the least so; and above all, he never lost confidence in his own ability.

CHAPTER III.

THE RACE FOR LIFE

The night was far flown when brave Jack Hawthorne, of No Man's Land, sighted the little cabin, snugly set away under a huge rocky ledge at Bed Rock.

The moon was, however, still shining brightly, so that the cabin was plainly discernible.

Everything seemed silent and deserted in the neighborhood, as Jack reined in his horse and peered cautiously in every direction in search of signs of possible molestation.

"I don't believe that Black Harry has left Como there without some sort of a guard over him, human or otherwise," murmured Jack. "Possibly there may be an outlaw or two asleep in the cabin, and Harry expects them to do me up. That would account in part for his bravado in challenging me to fight him when I return.

"Bah! If there are a dozen of them there, on guard, I am going in just the same, and what is more, I am going to bring Como out with me."

Dismounting from his beautiful horse, which was a large, black stallion, very appropriately named "Lightning," by his master, he ordered him, in the Apache tongue, to wait for him, and Lightning with an intelligent pricking up of his ears, for an instant, lowered his head and began cropping the grass, which grew abundantly all along the base of the fertile hills.

He was a remarkably intelligent horse, although he knew the meaning of no word in English, for Jack had made it a point of always giving his commands in the Apache tongue, a circumstance which had on several occasions prevented the animal from being stolen from his master.

Rapidly, yet silently and with great caution, the young man approached the lonely cabin.

Everything was silent and deserted.

Not a sign of a living thing could be seen or heard, except the young American and his horse.

As Jack drew nearer to the cabin, he crouched down until

he almost crept upon his hands and knees, but never once did he slacken his pace.

Soon the cabin was reached.

It was a low structure, barely high enough to allow a man to stand upright within its walls, and was about twelve feet square.

There was a window and one door in front, and these were the only openings in the structure, and the window had been effectually closed by huge blocks of adobe.

He reached the door in due time, and dropping flat upon the earth outside, placed his ear against the crack beneath it.

Yes, he could detect the sound of breathing.

But only of one person.

After listening intently for a full minute, Jack was satisfied that there was but one person within the hut.

That person could be no other than Como.

With a quick bound he regained his feet, and placing his shoulder against the door, pressed with all his might.

Much to his surprise, there was next to no resistance.

The door gave way immediately and he entered the cabin.

There in the middle of the floor lay what looked like a huge bundle of blankets.

But the bundle was Como, bound precisely as Black Harry had said.

It was the work of but an instant for Jack to produce his knife and sever the tight coils of the lariat which bound the Indian youth so helplessly in the folds of the blanket.

In a moment he had assisted the boy to his feet.

Bound and gagged for hours, lying prone upon the cold, earthen floor of the cabin, he had suffered terribly, but he made no complaint.

He only cast himself with a cry of joy into Jack's arms.

"Drop it, Como," was Jack's rather laconic and somewhat unfeeling comment. "I'm as glad as you are, and all that, but we've got no time for hugging like a couple of bears now. The thing for us to do is to light out of this before some of those fellows drop down upon us. Come."

He started toward the door, and Como endeavored to follow, but he staggered, and with an exclamation of pain sank to the floor.

He had been bound so long that his limbs were numb and helpless.

"Played out, eh, Como?" said Jack, turning quickly around. "Well, I don't wonder. It's enough to play out a tougher fellow than you are. Here, I'll carry you."

Stooping, and with apparently little or no effort, he raised the slight form of the young Indian from the floor, and started rapidly toward the point where Lightning was still nipping the grass.

"You are not much heavier than one of my feathers, Como," he said, as he hurried rapidly along.

"Hello! what's that?"

Jack had heard a familiar sound.

Stooping quickly, he placed his ear to the ground.

Yes, he was right.

The sound of horses' hoofs could be plainly heard.

Lightning, too, had raised his head and pricked up his ears.

"A good dozen of them, I should think," muttered Jack, as he again rose to his feet, "and coming from the south.

"Perhaps they are coming to intercept me, and perhaps not. It's more than likely that they are.

"Anyway, I'll light out in double-quick time."

He whistled shrilly, and with a few bounds Lightning was at his side, with quivering nostrils and flashing eyes, ready for the race, which evidently was about to begin.

"I don't like to compel you to carry double, old fellow," said Jack apologetically to the horse, as he placed Como just behind the saddle, and then vaulted easily into it himself, "but for this time you've got to do it."

"Put your arms around me, Como, and hang on, for we're off now," he continued, and then uttering a sharp command Lightning proved the appropriateness of his name by starting away like the wind.

Nor did they make the start a moment too soon, for the beautiful stallion had not taken more than a half dozen of his wonderful leaps before a party of twelve horsemen dashed in sight over the top of a knoll, and within easy rifle range.

The instant when the approaching horsemen came in sight, they discovered, in the bright moonlight, the figures of Jack and Como, mounted upon the black stallion.

With a loud cry they wheeled their horses to the left, and urging them to higher speed, started in pursuit.

At the same moment there sounded the sharp crack of a rifle, and it was followed by a groan from Como, who swayed for a moment where he sat.

Jack did not realize that his friend was hit until he felt the young Indian's arms begin to relax their hold about his body.

He was almost too late to save the youth from falling.

As it was, the poor fellow nearly reached the ground before Jack's hand seized him by the collar.

With almost superhuman strength, he raised Como again to the saddle, but this time held him in his arms, for the youth had entirely lost consciousness, and was limp and apparently lifeless.

Jack, indeed, thought him dead, but he never once thought of letting him drop, in order to increase his own chances of safety.

With the Indian boy lying easily across the saddle in front of him, he leaned as far forward as possible and urged his horse to even greater speed.

Burdened as he was, he could not return the fire of the outlaws and his only chance of safety consisted in beating them in the race.

That he could do so he felt no doubts, for he knew Lightning's powers of speed and endurance, and even though he was carrying double, he never once doubted but that he would soon distance his pursuers.

It was with considerable satisfaction that, closely following the rifle shot which had wounded or killed Como, he heard a hoarse shout of disapproval from one of the outlaws emphasized by an oath, commanding them to fire no more, but to take the fugitives alive.

"The black horse is carrying double. We kin soon tire him out," the voice had continued, and Jack had smiled grimly as he replied, who:

"Easy, Lightning, let 'em gain a little, it will make them feel surer."

On, on they dashed, while mile after mile was covered, and they were nearing the vicinity of the settlement.

The moon had gone behind the front hills, and it was considerably darker.

"Five miles more," muttered Jack. "Lightning, old boy, can you stand it?"

He urged the horse to still greater exertions, and the noble steed responded so well that they began to draw away from the pursuers.

Then a hoarse shout went up from the outlaws.

"He'll escape us, after all!" was the cry. "Dead or alive now! Shoot, all of you! Wing the horse if you can!"

Immediately there followed the reports of a dozen rifles, and Jack, with a convulsive shudder threw himself forward, still clinging to the form of Como.

His eyes closed, he breathed hard and fast, and his face grew frightfully pale, but he never once loosened his hold upon the young Indian; never once did his knees lessen their pressure upon the saddle flaps.

Report after report came from the pursuing rifles, but the

silent and motionless riders on the black stallion flew onward, and still onward towards the goal of safety.

Would they reach it?

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHALLENGE—BIG MIKE CRAWLS

The early morning air was startled by the reports of firearms.

The residents of Wasp's Nest in No Man's Land were never excited by such sounds, for they were of too constant occurrence.

Nevertheless, several of them peered from their homes in time to see a powerful black horse, bearing two persons upon his back, dash past, and then all was still again.

The horse, guided by its own sagacious knowledge of locality, bounded straight through the village—or city, as it was fondly called—toward the house where Jack Hawthorne lived, nor did he once slacken his pace until the door was reached.

Then he came to a halt, and uttered a loud neigh, which served as an announcement to those within that he had arrived.

The door was instantly thrown ajar, and the horse, without awaiting the word of command, passed through it out of sight, and the door was instantly closed.

"Quick!" gasped Jack, to the two men who were there to receive him. "Take Como! we have both been hit, and I am afraid the boy is dead."

Como was taken from his arms and stretched on a pile of blankets. Jack, himself, was quickly helped from the horse's back, and then the animal was led through the wide hall into a high inclosure at the back of the house.

A careful examination showed that neither of the riders were severely hurt.

Both had been hit in the head, but both had escaped serious injury.

Como had been struck a glancing blow just over the temple, the ball having cut a furrow in the skin and drawn considerable blood, but it was evident that within a few hours he would be as well as ever.

As for Jack his vanity had saved him.

The huge sombrero—decked with silver coins—had acted as a shield.

The rifle ball struck squarely upon one of the silver dollars which were arranged in a band around the hat, having the same effect upon him as though stricken sharply with a blunt instrument.

The blow had stunned him, but had drawn no blood, so that a few moments' rest and cold water applications rendered him as well as ever again, with the exception of a slight headache.

Having seen to it that Como was well cared for in half an hour he started for the "Shouter" saloon, where he was to meet Black Harry.

A few moments' walk took him there, but, as he had expected, the outlaw had escaped.

Nobody had seen him go, but that he had left was evident, for a careful search failed to produce him.

"Gentlemen," said Jack, when all were satisfied that Black Harry had preferred running to engaging in a conflict with the young American, "you all heard Black Harry challenge me to fight him; you all heard him say he would wait here until my return, and you are all aware that he has shown the white feather—that he was too much of a coward to wait for me here, even though I gave him his choice of weapons.

"If there are any here who sympathize with him and wish to take up his quarrel, let them step out like men, and if there

are a dozen. I will fight them all, for I'll tell you plainly that I will shoot the scoundrel on sight."

He paused, but beyond a low murmur of approval from several of the bystanders, not a word of reply was spoken.

Then Jack again raised his voice.

"I went to the cabin at Red Bank," he said, "and I found Como there. As I was bringing him away, a dozen horsemen took up the chase. Both of us were hit by their bullets, but neither of us were hurt much.

"Back Harry played me false; he is a scoundrel! Is there anyone here who dares to express sympathy for his cause?"

There was a moment's silence, and then a big, red-whiskered fellow stepped forward.

He was known throughout the region as Big Mike, and was a dangerous character.

"Jack Hawthorne," he said in a gruff voice, "I ain't a-sympathizin' with Black Harry, an' I ain't a-lookin' fur no fight with you, but I've got suthin' ter say."

"All right, Mike—fire away."

"I war here when Black Harry lit out."

"Ah!"

"An' I saw him go."

"Exactly."

"He told me he war a-goin'——"

"And bade you a fond adieu," interrupted Jack.

"Wait, youngster. He left a message with me fur you."

"Ah! he did, eh?"

"Yes, he did. He allowed he couldn't git fair play here, where the hull! bilin' were dead agin' him, an' thet's ther reason why he didn't stay to fight ye."

"Ah! he thought that all these gentlemen, yourself included, Mike, were as deeply dyed scoundrels as himself. Complimentary, very. But go on with your message."

"He left another challenge for ye."

"Another challenge? Bah! He's too great a coward to fight. But go on; let us hear it."

"He'll meet you to-night an hour afore sundown half way atween here an' Red Rock. You kin take six men with you, an' he'll have six with him ter see fair play."

"When the two parties come in sight o' each other, everybody is to halt, except Black Harry an' yourself, an' you two are to keep ridin' forward till one of ye drops. Thet's the challenge."

"It sounds all right," replied Jack, "but I am satisfied that there is a trick concealed in it somewhere, for I know that Black Harry is afraid to meet me."

"So you're a-goin' ter crawl, air you, Jack Hawthorne?" sneered Big Mike.

"Not much, Mikey," returned Jack smiling a little; "nary a crawl, but I know somebody who is."

"Who?"

"You!"

"What!" and Mike's eyes blazed with wrath.

"You, I said," repeated Jack, "a great big, red-faced ruffian, known as Big Mike is going to 'crawl,' as you call it, right here."

With an oath, Mike's hand fell upon the butt of his revolver.

"Drop it, Mike," said Jack, coldly, and his never failing weapon was pointed straight at the ruffian's heart.

"I said you were going to crawl, and now I'll prove it," he continued.

"Get down on your hands and knees and crawl for that door, or as surely as I am Jack Hawthorne, I'll have you carried out, feet first; crawl, I tell you!"

With a muttered curse, the ruffian obeyed, for he saw that Jack was in no mood for trifling.

"Listen, Mike," said Jack, as the burly fellow made his way laboriously towards the door, "but keep on crawling, for I can say all I've got to say before you reach the door."

"I know you are in league with Black Harry, and I know him to be in command of a gang of outlaws.

"If you ever get back you can tell him that I am going to exterminate every man of his band, or drive them from the country. You can tell him also that I will be on hand to-night for the fight he proposes, and that I know he is too big a coward to be there himself unless he has put up some job. If he has it won't work.

"Now, as for you! If you have got any fight left in you, you can wait for me when you get outside, for I shall leave the Shouter exactly five minutes after you do. Will you be there, Mikey?"

A curse was his only reply.

Presently the door was reached, and an obliging hand having opened it, Big Mike crawled through it, and was gone.

CHAPTER V.

THE UNCROWNED KING.

The door had no sooner closed behind the creeping, crawling figure of Big Mike, than Jack took his watch and began to count the minutes.

"Do you think he will wait for me, gentlemen?" he asked of those who remained, and who were waiting for the moment to come when Jack Hawthorne should step out and face his enemy.

"Sure to," responded one of them. "He'd be a fool if he didn't."

"Why so?" coolly demanded Jack.

"Because all he has got to do is to keep his pop ready, and when you show yourself, bore a hole through you before you have a chance to say scat."

"Think so? Well, we will see. I don't much believe that he will wait for me—but he may. If he does, it will be he that gets bored, and not Jack Hawthorne—mark that! I'm not quite ready to shuffle off yet."

An interval of silence ensued, and then Jack closed his watch with a snap.

"Time's up," he said, and started for the door.

"Stand back away from the door so that none of you get bored by mistake."

They were not slow to obey, for Big Mike was well known among them to be a good shot, and not one of them relished the idea of stopping a stray bullet.

The door, of course, opened in, and Jack had ^{or, at least, he} he could foil Big Mike's plan, if indeed the ^{he} ^{he} really be in waiting for him, ready to shoot him down as soon as he should appear.

Keeping well out of sight Jack threw the door wide open, and the sharp crack of a revolver instantly announced that Big Mike was on the alert, ready to kill.

The ball from his revolver whizzed through the open doorway and imbedded itself in the opposite wall, doing no damage whatever, for Jack was well out of the way.

But the report of the fire-arm had told our hero all he wished to know, for by it he had without difficulty located the place where Big Mike was in hiding.

There was a window to the left of the door, covered by a green paper curtain.

Jack at once stepped toward it, and in an instant had made a hole the size of his finger through which he peered.

As he had suspected, Big Mike had taken his position on the opposite side of the street behind an empty hogshead which had come in on some wagon train.

He could see the desperado's right arm and a part of his face as he peered out, eagerly watching the doorway for Jack to appear.

"Now, boys," said Jack, "be ready to see the fun, for it is about to begin. I am going out of the door."

"He'll kill you before you have a chance to pull your gun up to a level," volunteered one of the bystanders.

"I guess not," returned Jack.

Seizing a stool, he placed it by the door jamb, and then got upon it.

"He expects me lower down," he said, in explanation, "and I am going to let him shoot under me."

"One, two, three!"

With a gigantic spring he leaped from the stool through the air, out of the door.

Almost as soon as his feet left the stool he fired his revolver.

A fraction of a second later came a report from the opposite side of the street, immediately followed by a yell of rage.

But Jack stood in the street uninjured.

Both his hands were extended, and in each he held one of the deadly weapons he so well knew how to use.

They were both pointed toward the hogshead behind which Big Mike was concealed, but not a sign of the outlaw's person could be seen.

"Can't you shoot with your left hand, Mikey?" shouted Jack, derisively, "or did the ball I just put through your right one take all the courage out of you? Try it with your left, Mikey; I am out here, in plain sight."

There was a moment's silence and then a muttered curse from behind the hogshead.

Suddenly a hand, grasping a revolver, was pushed into view, but it had no sooner appeared than one of Jack's weapons cracked with a venomous ring.

Then another yell of rage and Jack coolly put his revolvers out of sight, turned and re-entered the "Shouter."

"It will be some time before Big Mike uses a weapon again," he said coldly, "and should any of you ever be in doubt as to his identity, you will always know him by the fact that he has had a bullet through each of his hands."

Returning to the door he shouted:

"You can come out, now, Mikey; I won't hurt you, but next time you had better tackle somebody nearer your size."

"Mark this, though—you have got forty-eight hours to light out of these diggings, and no more, for if you don't, I'll make another hole through you, and next time it will be straight between your eyes. You know what that means. Now, skip, or I'll shoot through the barrel."

The figure of Mike arose from its concealment, and without word or look, slunk away down the street and disappeared.

Those who were gathered together in the Shouter looked with awe upon the young man whose prowess with his weapons was so wonderful.

They might be excused from attributing supernatural powers to Jack Hawthorne, for there was not a man among them but had time after time looked death in the face in a hundred forms without flinching.

There was not one among them but felt that he was as quick with his weapons as any man living except Jack Hawthorne, but in him they one and all saw their superior, nor did any have the temerity to question the fact.

"Friends," said Jack as he re-entered the saloon, "I have got a few words to say to you all.

"Some of you who are here now I know well enough to relieve you from any of the consequences which my words may precipitate; but there are others here who are comparatively unknown to me.

"To you all I want to say this: From this hour on I have sworn eternal enmity to Black Harry and his gang of outlaws and ruffians. If there is any one here who sympathizes with him, be warned now, for I am going to drive every man of them from this part of the country or bury them here.

"We are in a land where there is no law to protect either

ourselves or our property, except such laws as we choose to enact and carry out ourselves.

"If we allow such people as those who form Black Harry's gang to have their heads, they will end by destroying every good principle we have, besides depriving us of what little we may gather, as the result of our toil!

"Now listen! I am going to make a stand to which some of you may object, but it is for the good of the community I take it.

"I am going to appoint myself the chief of this district, and I and those who are my friends are going to see that order is preserved in and around this settlement.

"We shall make laws best suited to our needs, and every man who is fair and open in his conduct will be protected, and may become one of us, but every man who breaks our laws and who does not play fair in the game of life, will be notified to leave the country, and failing to do so will be buried here.

"If any of you have any complaints to make, lodge them with me, and they shall be attended to."

"Yer makin' a sort o' uncrowned king of yourself, ain't yer?" growled one of the listeners.

"Yes, if you choose to call it so. Do you object to it, Sam Derby? I think you are one of the men who will have reason to fear me, so if you have any objections, step out now and state them."

"No, no, Jack Hawthorne, I ain't got no objections, an' as fur fearin' ye, well, I don't fear no man, I don't!"

A quiet smile flitted across Jack's face.

"Very well, Jim; I think I understand you."

"Mebby you'll understand me better later on."

"Perhaps. I expect to be shot at from behind, but I'm going to stay here long enough to carry out my scheme, just the same.

"You will oblige me by repeating what I have said to Black Harry."

"I shan't have no chance, pard."

"Don't lie, Jim. You'll have a chance inside of three hours, for when you leave here you will go straight to Black Harry. Carry my message to him, and tell him that Jack Hawthorne, the uncrowned king of No Man's Land, has declared war against him, and that if he is caught he will not be shot, but hung, like the horse thief he is."

After delivering these last words, Jack looked calmly around the room for a full minute, but seeing that none of them cared to question his resolve, he wheeled, and passed quickly out of the door into the street.

But he had not gone a dozen paces before he heard the report of a fire-arm, and at the same instant a ball whizzed past his right ear.

"Already!" he exclaimed as he wheeled and faced the direction whence the shot came.

A little puff of smoke gave him the locality, for it was slowly rising over the big hogshead behind which Big Mike had concealed himself.

Holding his weapon ready for instant use, Jack began slowly walking towards the hogshead, behind which he knew the enemy who had fired at him lay hiding.

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12 1/2
281

CHAPTER VI.

SAWED OFF SAM

"Stand up and show yourself, or I will shoot through the hogshead!" ordered Jack, sternly, as he drew nearer, but the concealed enemy, whoever he was, refused to comply.

True to his word, Jack sent a bullet crashing through the

huge barrel, purposely aiming very low, intending only to injure and not to kill his hidden foe.

A loud yell followed the report of his revolver, and then all was still again.

"Stand up!" ordered Jack.

The fellow, however, refused to stand up.

"Do you want me to shoot again?" asked Jack.

"Shoot and be blowed!" said a gruff voice. "It don't make no difference whether ye put a hole through me while I'm inside o' this here thing, 'r when I git out an' stan' up!"

"Ah! so you are inside the hogshead, are you?" asked Jack pleasantly.

"No, pard, it's a hog'shead 'r a jackass's head wot's inside o' this 'ere barrel."

"Well, why don't you come out?"

"I'm engaged, I am! besides, I've got er hole into one o' my knees, an' it don't bend reg'lar."

"Ah, my bullet!"

"Right ye be, stranger."

"Why do you call me stranger? Don't you know me?"

"Yaas, I know ye fur a cussed fool! What in blazes d'ye want'er go pokin' into my 'boodoir' fur?"

"Your what?"

"My bedroom."

"Ah! so you were asleep, were you?"

"I war, stranger, an' I call it docid onkind in ye ter wake me up so suddint like. Ye might ha' been a trifle more gentle 'bout it."

"So? And do you make a habit of snoozing in barrels and shooting at people in your sleep?"

"Hey?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Yaas, but I didn't couple onter wat ye said."

"Well, then, in plain English, what did you shoot at me for if you didn't want to be disturbed in your slumber?"

"Say, stranger, was thet you?"

"Oh, no; it's my ghost that is doing the talking. I'm lying out cold and stiff in the gutter just below here, with your bullet through my brain."

"My bullet?"

"That is what I said."

"But I ain't put no bullet into ye."

"No, but you tried to."

"Stranger, ye're a liar."

Jack started as though a bee had stung him.

He hadn't any doubt but that the person inside of the hogshead was the one who shot at him, and yet there was a ring of honest indignation in his gruff voice when he refuted Jack's statement so emphatically.

"Did ye hear me, stranger?" continued the voice, before Jack could reply. "I said ye war a liar, an' I kin prove it. Instead o' shootin' at you, you've been a poppin' at me, an' wot's more, you're laid one o' my legs up fur repairs."

"Are you telling the truth?" asked Jack.

"You bet! You're the only liar present at this 'ere conversation. Jest help me outen this pesky barrel an' prop me up agin it on ther outside an' then git off a little ways an' I'll hev a shootin' match with you to prove it."

"Do you want me to help you out?"

"You bet!"

Jack stepped forward without further ado and leaned over the top of the hogshead.

There, curled up in the bottom was the figure of a man.

"Give me your hand," said Jack.

The man complied, and while our hero assisted him, managed to raise himself so that he stood upon one leg inside the hogshead.

He groaned with pain several times during the process, but

finally, after great exertion, he was safely on the outside of his queer hiding place.

He presented a strange appearance as he stood there.

Quite short in stature, but supernaturally muscular, he had the look of being almost as broad as he was long.

He had a strong, kindly face, covered by a shaggy beard, and surmounted by a shock, unkempt head of iron-gray hair, and lighted up by a pair of keen gray eyes. His arms seemed to be of unusual length, and his legs remarkably short.

Jack looked at him in wonder, for he had never seen him before.

"Who are you?" he asked abruptly.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," responded the man, "but where they know me best they calls me 'Sawed-off Sam. Who be you?"

"Don't you know?" asked Jack smiling, for although he was beginning to think he had made a mistake, he was not yet sure.

"Ef I did I wouldn't ax."

"Very well, I am Jack Hawthorne, of No Man's Land."

"Hey? Wat, ye-ou?"

Jack nodded.

"Well, I'm blowed, I am!" ejaculated the sawed-off.

"Very likely," responded Jack.

"Say, stranger, ef you're Jack Hawthorne, I've got suthin' interestin' to tell ye. But, hole on. Let's hev thet air shootin' match fust, an' then I'll tell my yarn," and he drew forth a heavy six-shooter. "I hope ye ain't got no preference fur posish, stran—that is, Jack, cos' since ye bored into my leg I can't move around as careless like as I could afore, so ef ye'll jest git onto t'other side o' the road, we'll begin."

"Wait," said Jack. "I know a better way to settle this thing than shooting at each other."

"How?"

"We will first determine who is the best shot, and then let him do all the shooting."

"Right ye be, but say, I warn ye thet I never met a man yet as could beat me shootin'."

"All right," said Jack, smiling; "now here is what we will do. Have you got two pops?"

"You bet!"

"Very well. Cock the one in your hand and throw it into the air. Then draw your second one and shoot at the trigger of the one in the air."

"I will do the same, and whichever of us fires off both his weapons, wins. Is it agreed?"

"Agreed. Pard, shake! Thet is suthin' new in the way o' shootin', but Sawed-off kin do it, you bet!"

A moment of preparation and then—

"One, two, three!" counted Jack.

Two revolvers went hurtling high in the air.

"Crack! Crack!" sounded two others and then, almost immediately:

"Bang! bang!"

Both of the flying revolvers had been discharged in the air as they were turning over and over.

Jack turned to Sawed-off Sam in astonishment, only to meet an equally astonished look from the stranger.

Our hero put out his hand.

"Shake," he said, laconically; "I know now that you are not the man who shot at me, and I owe you an apology for plugging you through the hogshead."

He then went on to explain the circumstances which had led him to believe that it was the man in the hogshead who had tried to kill him.

"It's all O. K., pard," said Sawed-off. "I've got er sort of affection fur thet bullet in my knee, seein' as how you put it there. Jest tote me along somehow to yer wigwam an' give

me plenty of whisky, an' I'll be all right purty soon. Besides, I've got a yarn to tell ye."

"A yarn?"

"You bet! an' one thet'll s'prise ye, too! but I ain't agoin' ter tell you till I git whar I'm more comfortable. Ye see, pard, I didn't stay all night an' half of to-day in thet air bedroom o' mine fur nothin'. I war purty rocky when I crawled in, but I was sober enough when I heerd wat I've got ter tell ye."

"Anything serious?"

"Wal, thet depends! Some fellers hev got a job put up on ye an' a youngster named Como, an' I guess their job would ha' worked ef ye hadn't met me. Mebby it 'twill anyway, cos I didn't hear the name of the traitor."

"Traitor! Did you say traitor?"

"You bet."

"Where?"

"In your shanty!"

"And these men propose——"

"Ter git into your wigwam ter-night, ter carry off the feller they call Como an' ter drop suthin' into your eyes to blind ye forever. They dassent kill ye cos yer watched over by the devil 'r suthin', but they kin blind ye, see?"

"And this is to be attempted to-night?"

"You bet! But that ain't the wurst of it, pard; the fellers wot's agoin' ter do ther job air inside the house now, hid away, waitin' fur night ter come."

Jack's lips set themselves firmly together, and his brow grew somber and stern.

"Come," he said, "for there is no time to lose. I will find a way to thank you later."

Assisting his new found friend, Jack made his way rapidly homeward.

Without realizing it, he was about to face the most deadly peril he had ever yet encountered.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PLOT—"HANDS UP"

"A traitor in my own house!"

Such was the thought which continued to repeat itself in the brain of Jack Hawthorne, as with difficulty assisting the crippled Sawed-off Sam, he made his way as rapidly as possible towards the only home he had in the world.

Jack had gathered around him twelve brave men, who had each and every one solemnly sworn to aid and stand by each other through every peril which might arise, and they had unanimously elected him their leader.

"Twelve brave and steadfast men," he thought. "There is not one of them upon whom I can fix suspicion, not one to whom I would not have willingly intrusted my life."

"Where, then, shall I look for the traitor?"

Suddenly he glanced sharply at the man he was assisting.

"Can it be," he thought, "that this man is deceiving me? Can it be that he is playing a part?"

"I would much more readily believe that he is false, than one of my own men—and yet I am not easily deceived in faces, and this man has an honest one."

"Perhaps he has been deceived himself. Perhaps he may have heard enough of some conversation to have dreamed the rest. He was, no doubt, deeply under the influence of liquor when he slept in the hogshead, and his ideas became muddled, and his imagination over active."

"Yes, that must be the explanation."

"Say, pard," said Sawed-off, suddenly; "I think I knows wot yer a discussin' in yer mind. Ye're a wonderin' ef I ain't lied to ye."

Jack started.

"Well, yes, that is just what I was wondering, for when you say that there is a traitor among my men, I find it hard to believe you, for every one of them seems to me to be absolutely trustworthy."

"Sure! thet air is allers the way. It's the easiest shots ye allers miss with yer shooter; it's the gal ye love the best wot goes back on ye fust; an' it's the vittils ye like best wot makes ye the sickest every time; an' in this 'ere case, ye'll find thet the man ye least suspect is the feller wot's gone back on ye. Leastwise, them's my sentiments; but I ain't allers right, I ain't—you bet!"

"You are perfectly sure of what you say in regard to the plot against me?"

"Es sure es shootin'."

"Tell me how you heard it all."

"Right. Ye see, pard, I biled over last night. The lickin's so cussed bad in thet air shop thet it knocked me out, an' 'thout knowin' exactly how 'r when 'r why I crawled into that air barrel."

"I don't know nothin' about how long I'd been there when I heerd talkin', an' ther first words I heerd were: 'Cuss 'im, he's marked me fur life!'"

"'A purty brace of ears you've got now, Harry,'" says another voice, an' then came some more cuss words which it ain't necessary to repeat.

"'Say,' says the fust voice, 'can't we do that air job we've been a talkin' about to-night?'"

"Any time," says t'other.

"'How about Como?' says one. 'Ef Jack Hawthorne comes back this morning, he'll bring Como with him. Ef he don't, thar won't be no use in your lettin' us into the house.'"

"'Wot air ye a-goin' ter do when ye git them inty yer power?' asked two; 'string 'em up?'"

"'Not much! Como's my huckleberry, an' es fur Hawthorne—well, I'm jest a-goin' ter put out his peepers an' then turn him loose. He won't shoot so cussed straight when he can't see.'"

Jack shuddered. Who would not, with the prospect of having his eyes put out?

"Go on," he said hoarsely.

"Thar ain't much more. They talked fur some time about their plans, and the gist of it war this:

"As soon as it war known thet you hed got back, two war to let one an' his friends inty your house. They were to lie hid somewhere until the middle of the night, an' then they were to snatch Como bald-headed, arter which they were to copper you an' put out your eyes."

"They got thet fur in their story an' then they went outen hearin', an' I went ter sleep ag'in."

"The next thing I knowed war when some one war shootin' from behind the barrel, an' a cussin' 'cos he'd got a hole in his hand."

"Then somebody ordered him to light out, an' he lit, an' I went to sleep ag'in."

"The next I knowed war when I got ter dreamin' thet I war in a scrimmage an' then I got plugged in the knee, an' you know the rest."

"Thar! thet's my yarn, an' all of it. Now, pard, you're the fust feller I've met wot knows how ter shoot, an' ef ye're agreeable, I'm agoin' ter tie to ye fur awhile, an' ef ye've got a scrimmage on hand, Sawed-off Sam's thar, every time!"

He stopped and stuck out his big bony hand, which Jack grasped heartily without a moment's hesitation.

"I believe you, Sam," he said, "and there's my hand on it."

Thus a compact of friendship was signed which endured for many a long year.

In a very few moments more the twain reached the house. Entering quickly, Jack conducted his companion to a room

where he could lie down, and proceeded, with the aid of Como, who was already able to be around, to dress the old hunter's wound.

As soon as his new friend had been made comfortable Jack passed out of the house by the rear door, and crossing the corral, which had been before referred to, entered and disappeared between a crevice in the rocks.

It led into a natural cave, which had been rendered more commodious by artificial means.

After walking about a hundred feet he entered quite a large room, where several men were idly smoking and talking.

Jack hastily counted them.

There were eight present. Four were missing.

He quickly inquired for them, but nobody knew their whereabouts.

But Jack himself knew where two of them were, for he had left them in the saloon.

"Friends," said Jack, "I have a particular reason for wanting you all here to-night, so I wish some of you would slide out, and find the others. I have got something to say, but I want to say it to you all."

Jack was greatly puzzled, and when the men had gone to do his bidding, he sat for a long time thinking over the situation.

"If I only knew whom to suspect," he thought; "but I do not. To me they all seem equally trustworthy—equally incapable of such base treachery as that."

"Then again, where will the traitor conceal Black Harry and his men? In the house, or here in the cave?"

He shook his head in perplexity.

"The cave is the most likely place," he thought, "for there are several parts of it that we never use."

There were two means of entrance and exit to and from Jack's headquarters.

One was through the house, as he had himself entered, and the other was by means of another cleft in the rocks, some distance up the hill.

That latter entrance was known to but two of his men, and strange to say, the very two who were unaccounted for as well as absent.

"That is the only way in which they could gain an entrance here without being discovered," mused the young hero, "and therefore it goes without saying that the traitor—if traitor there be—is either Phil Bently or Alf Winant."

"Anyway I am prepared for them now, and they will get a very warm reception—one that will cure them of any desire to make a second visit."

But why did not Jack look behind him?

Even he would have stood dismayed had he done so, for five dark forms had glided into the spacious subterranean room behind him, and were standing so as to bar the only means of exit from it.

They were standing there patiently waiting for him to turn and confront them.

Every man of the five held a weapon, and every weapon was pointed full at Jack's heart.

Presently he did turn.

Then he leaped back with a cry of consternation and surprise.

"Hands up!" said a stern voice at the same instant, and for the first time in his life Jack obeyed that order.

CHAPTER VIII.

TURNING THE TABLES

Jack Hawthorne of No Man's Land was trapped at last.

Ever on the alert; ever ready with his weapons; forewarned

by an almost superhuman instinct, he had always been able to foil his enemies heretofore, but at last, like the famous Shamus O'Brien, the moment came when his enemies outwitted him and he was caught.

Realizing upon the instant that there was no possible chance for him to escape capture, he calmly raised his hands over his head.

"You've got me," he said, coolly.

One of the five men instantly stepped forward.

It was Black Harry.

"Hand over your weapons, Jack Hawthorne," he said; "you ain't safe as long as you have got a shootin'-iron about you."

But Jack had been edging further away from the others until he had reached one corner of the cavernous room.

"Wait, Harry," he cried, sharply; "I've got something to say to you before I hand over my revolvers. Surely, you'll let a fellow speak when five of you have got the drop on me all at once."

Black Harry nodded.

"Fire away," he said, "but cut it short."

"This morning," began Jack, "I had a vision. I saw in the vision, that you had captured me. You wanted to kill me, but you were too great a coward, and so you set to thinking out some other means of revenge."

"You thought for a long time, and at last decided to put out my eyes."

"Ah! you start! You see, Harry, my dreams are apt to come true."

Black Harry chuckled wickedly.

"This one is, anyhow!" he cried.

"Exactly," continued Jack coolly, "and that is why I want to tell you the balance of my dream."

"You tried to put my eyes out, but somehow you didn't succeed, for my sight came back to me, and I lived to see you served in exactly the same way, only the job was better done and you remained blind."

"That is my dream—what do you think of it? Now come and take my revolvers for they are ready for you, but beware how you use them, for as I am used by you, so you will be dealt with later on."

Black Harry hesitated before stepping forward for the weapons, and Jack could see that his story had had a very visible effect upon the outlaw.

Would it save his eyes?

Doubtful, yet it might postpone the dreaded moment, and in time there is always hope.

As soon as he had given up his revolvers and had been thoroughly searched to make sure that there were no odds concealed about him, Black Harry turned to the men who were with him:

"Now, men," he said, "there is no use in postponing the balance of our work till night. We might as well finish this job now an' hev it done."

"The rest of you skip fur the house and nail onto Como, the Injun. Ye needn't mind nothin' nor nobody else, but I want him, fur sure! I'll stay here an' see thet this 'ere chap don't take wings an' fly away."

A piece of rope was secured, with which Jack's hands were bound tightly behind his back, and then he was left alone with Black Harry.

"What are you going to do with Como?" asked Jack.

"That's my biz!" retorted the outlaw. "It may be as how I knows more about that chap than you do."

"What do you mean?"

"Mebby I mean suthin', an' mebbly I don't, but I know he ain't no Injun."

"Not an Injun?" exclaimed Jack.

"Nary Injun! He's as white under the stain as you and I are—that is, whiter than I am."

"I certainly hope so," retorted Jack; "most Indians are."

"Talk away, youngster, if it does you any good."

"But what makes you think that Como is not an Indian?"

"I know he ain't."

"How do you know it?"

"That's my biz! I know it, an' that's enough. I'm agoin' ter make him tell me the rest, an' if he's got any rich relatives, they've gotter pay well ter git him back to their boosums agin."

"Ah! So that's your game, is it? I——"

Just then Jack gave a violent start, but instantly recovered his composure.

"Wot's the matter with you?" asked Black Harry.

"I saw something," replied Jack.

"What did ye see?"

"I saw a noose in the end of a rope coming down right over your head."

Black Harry moved uneasily and glanced hurriedly upwards in spite of himself.

As he did so there came a swishing sound through the air, and a noose did fall over the outlaw's head.

He crouched and sprang away, but he was not quick enough.

His own effort to get away added an extra force to the quick jerk which followed the dropping of the noose over him, and in another instant he was struggling and kicking on the floor gasping for breath.

Well he might, for the slip-noose upon the lasso which had been cast over him was growing tighter and tighter upon his neck every moment.

"Pull, Como, pull!" cried Jack. "Choke the villain until he is unconscious, for his friends are likely to return at any moment."

Como did not need any urging. He was pulling, as Black Harry could have testified.

He was rapidly becoming Black Harry in earnest, owing to the strain upon his windpipe.

All the while he was struggling with might and main to tear the hated noose from his neck, and all the while Como was exerting himself equally hard to keep the noose tight.

Jack meanwhile was making his way slowly towards Como.

"Pull on the lasso with one hand and draw your knife with the other," he said to Como.

"That's right! Now cut this rope on my wrists," and he wheeled so that his back was toward the young Indian.

In another moment his hands were free.

Quickly seizing the lasso from Como's hands he applied his own strength to it, and in another moment the outlaw was glad to beg for mercy.

"Go and take away his weapons, Como!" ordered Jack, and the youth, nothing loth, did as requested.

Then, and not till then, did Jack let up on the cruel noose, which had choked the outlaw into semi-unconsciousness.

"Did you find my revolvers on him, Como? Good, I feel better now that I have got them back."

Hastily pinioning the outlaw's hands behind him in the same fashion in which his own had been tied but a few moments before, he said sternly:

"Now, you scoundrel, march, and I warn you if you make a sound I'll stop your breath forever."

Directing him away from the house, and therefore toward the secret entrance of the cave, he compelled Black Harry to move on in front of him.

They passed along some considerable distance in that way, and then turned abruptly into a narrow side passage, which led up a steep incline for about fifteen yards, and then came to an abrupt stop.

But there was a ladder before them, and Jack ordered Black Harry to climb it.

At first he refused, but a few meaning suggestions from our

hero persuaded him that it was best to obey without question.

The ladder was quite long, and they stepped from it upon a flat, rock-floored room about ten feet square.

Quickly drawing the ladder up after him Jack struck a light.

Over in one corner was an old fire-place, and above it an iron ring had been let into the wall and fastened there, upon which to hang a kettle.

"This was my home once, Harry," said Jack, "and it shall be yours now for a time—until I decide what I will do with you."

"I'll fasten you with the rope for the present, but I've got a chain in the house, which will do nicely, and when your friends have gone I will get it and make you a present of it."

Without much ado he proceeded to securely bind the outlaw, finishing the job by tying him fast to the iron ring in the rock.

"Your friends may look for you in vain, Harry; they will never find you here," said Jack when he had finished.

CHAPTER IX.

TRICKED

In the further part of the cavernous apartment where Jack had conducted Black Harry, was another ladder, and towards that our hero hastened as soon as he was satisfied that the outlaw was made fast.

He climbed up to the top, emerging upon a natural shelf or ledge of rock, which, from any point below, must have seemed inaccessible.

It was, however, a most advantageous position, for it commanded a complete view of Wasp's Nest.

There Jack could calmly watch all that was going on in the settlement, with no danger of being himself seen.

A glance satisfied him.

All was quiet in the street and about his house.

Turning to Como, who had followed him, he said:

"How did you happen to be in the cave in the nick of time, Como?"

"I had followed you to warn you of danger, and was just about to speak to you when the five men entered the big room in the cave in front of me."

"And then you waited?"

"No, I ran for my lasso. You know it is the weapon I know best how to use."

"True. But tell me—did you hear what Black Harry said about you?"

"I did."

"Of course it is all a yarn."

"No, it is the truth."

"What—you are not an Indian?"

"No. My nativity is as pure as your own."

"Then, Como, you have deceived me?"

"I have; but you will forgive me; nay, more, you will not force me to tell more now."

"Force you? No! Tell me nothing that you do not wish to tell."

"Don't be displeased with me, Jack. It is only because I am not ready to tell you yet, that I do not; it is not that I do not wish to. Trust me, and when the day comes that you know my story, you will tell me that I did right."

"All right, Como, as you please. But how did Black Harry find this out?"

"By letters which he took from me when he captured me. That is the only way."

"Ah! You said just now that you followed me into the cave to warn me of danger. What did you mean?"

"I meant that one of the men is a traitor."

"Ah! which one?"

"Alf Winant."

"Alf! Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

"How did you find it out?"

"I suspected it before Black Harry captured me, but I overheard enough while I was in his power to prove it."

"Then you think it was through his treachery that Black Harry got into the cave to-day?"

"I know it."

"Very well. Come now, we will go down. Those fellows have ransacked the house by this time and gone. I wonder what they have done with the Sawed-off."

"Who?"

"Sawed-off Sam; the man whose wound we dressed."

"Perhaps they have carried him off in place of ourselves."

"I hardly think so, but come."

They went down the ladder again, Jack leading the way.

Black Harry was exactly as they had left him, and except for a few deep curses upon his luck, said nothing.

"Good-by, Harry," said Jack pleasantly. "I will be back again before long with something more secure than that rope to fasten you with."

When they reached the house they found that but little had been disturbed.

As for Sawed-off Sam he had not been molested.

He said that two men had entered the room and asked him where Como was.

Supposing them to be friends of Jack he had told them that the youngster had just gone out somewhere, and that was all he had seen of any of them.

Returning to the cave, Jack found signs of them, and came to the conclusion that they had departed as they came, no doubt thinking that Black Harry had got tired of waiting and had gone on without them with his prisoner.

A full hour had gone by ere Jack was ready to return to the spot where he had left the outlaw chief, and before going he sent Como out upon a short errand, for the purpose of saving time, for he was determined to begin his career as the uncrowned king at once.

Law and order were unknown quantities at Wasp's Nest, and he was resolved to have them recognized.

He had given warning to that effect, and he meant to carry out his word to the letter.

But he must begin at home by making an example of Alf Winant.

That he meant to do.

Turning his plans over in his mind, and chain in hand, he made his way toward the upper cavern, where he had left Black Harry.

On leaving the place with Como, he had lowered the ladder from its resting place.

It took but a moment to put it into place again.

Just what to do with the outlaw he did not know.

That he was a dangerous man to let run at large, he knew, and yet to take the law into his own hands sufficiently to punish the fellow as he deserved, he did not care to do.

Slowly mounting the ladder he threw the rays of the light which he carried into the corner where Black Harry should be.

But the outlaw was not there.

Jack rubbed his eyes and looked again.

No, he was not mistaken.

Black Harry was gone.

With a quick bound Jack reached the spot where the fellow had been tied to the ring in the rock.

The ropes still hung there, but they had been cut as if with a sharp knife.

"I know that he did not have a knife about him," muttered

Jack; "and therefore it follows that some one has liberated him.

"But who? One of his own men? That is very unlikely because none of them would know where to look for him, and they might search this cave over for days without finding this spot.

"Who then? Alf? Surely it must have been Alf.

"But how could he get up here to cut the cords? Harry was tied so securely that he could not possibly get away himself, nor did he have a knife with which to cut his bonds as these are cut.

"It must have been Alf. He has found the ladder, climbed up and liberated Black Harry, and then upon going away, he has taken the ladder down again, leaving it as he found it.

"I will climb up to the lookout and have a peep before I go back, for there is no use in hurrying now."

Suiting the action to the word, he hurried towards the second ladder.

But that, also, was missing.

"Hello!" he thought; possibly I am mistaken after all. Black Harry may have freed himself, climbed up into the lookout and drawn the ladder up after him."

Turning hastily, he grasped the other ladder and quickly pulled it up.

Carrying it across the room, he placed it in position and began climbing upward toward the lookout.

His weapons were in readiness, but he had no use for them.

Although he expected to see Black Harry crouched and ready to spring upon him, he did not.

The lookout was untenanted.

He crawled out upon the ledge and laid at full length, peering with comprehensive glance down upon the street in Wasp's Nest.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Black Harry, as sure as I live!" he cried.

He was right.

Walking along the street was no other person than the outlaw chief himself.

"Well, I call that cheek!" muttered Jack. "Harry is making the most of his opportunity. Knowing that I have got to return here and am not likely to encounter him upon the street, he is busily walking about in defiance of me, for every man in the village knows that I have sworn to kill the scoundrel on sight.

"Hello, there comes Como! They are sure to meet. I wonder what the result will be.

"Will they pass each other, or will there be trouble?"

Jack gazed with a sort of fascination upon the scene below him.

He was out of ear-shot as well as pistol-shot, where he was, and the way to the village was so winding that he knew he could not get there in time to intercept Harry if he tried.

"In another moment they will be together," he muttered.

"Ah! Black Harry has seen who is approaching, while Como has not.

"He is getting his revolvers ready.

"Now he tells him to throw up his hands—Como obeys—Harry approaches nearer—he is taking Como's weapons away from him."

Jack could see it all from his point of lookout.

At that instant a man dashed up the street on horseback leading two other horses.

In another moment Harry had compelled Como to mount one of the horses, himself mounting the other.

Then, putting spurs to his animal, they started away at full swing.

With a cry of rage Jack dashed toward his ladder.

Como taken prisoner before his own eyes and he unable to render him any service.

It was extremely galling.

With one bound he reached the ladder.

It was gone!

Somebody had taken it down while he was watching the street below.

"Tricked!" he cried, as he started back. "But by whom? Who has followed me here to make a prisoner of me after this fashion? Who, but the same traitor who is the cause of all of today's doings?"

Nevertheless, the ladder was gone.

Como was captured before his own eyes, and he himself was in a fair way to become a captive again in a few hours.

Would they capture him this time?

CHAPTER X.

COMO A PRISONER

Como was hurrying along the street towards the house, returning from the errand which had been Jack's bidding, when suddenly came the order:

"Hands up!"

He glanced up quickly, at the same time raising his hands over his head, for in that lawless country to disobey such an order even for an instant meant death.

His surprise when he saw Black Harry before him, may be better imagined than described.

The outlaw, whom he and Jack had left so securely bound to the rock in the cave, was already at large, and was evidently intent upon wreaking his revenge without delay.

"So I've got ye, hev I?" exclaimed the outlaw. "Well, this time I'm a-goin' ter keep ye—mind that, Injun. Ye thought ye had me—tied me like a dog up thar in the cave—but Black Harry was too slippery for you that time."

Just then the horses were brought up, and Como was soon being carried at a rapid gait over the plains.

He did not know Jack had seen him from the lookout, and would soon use every effort in his power to pursue his captors.

Much less did he know to what fate he was being conducted.

But then he thought it mattered little to what he was going if only his captors did not discover his real identity.

He trembled lest they might.

Knowing that Black Harry was convinced that he was, not in reality an Indian, he trembled to think what the consequences might be should the investigation as to his identity reveal his true character to the ruffianly crew in whose power he had fallen.

Hour after hour they galloped on, now and then pausing to allow the horses to take breath for a fresh start and then away again.

Straight north their course lay. Through a gully between the foothills, and then on and on, over the trackless waste until he wondered where their destination could be.

But he was soon to know.

They drew near to a range of foothills, not unlike those near Wasp's Nest, only higher and more extensive—so that they might merit the term mountains.

They made their way up a narrow canyon, winding and very steep, at length emerging upon a mesa or tableland, which was only accessible by the path which they had used.

It was evidently the headquarters for the band of outlaws, for there were two rather commodious adobe houses, and every appearance of permanent headquarters.

"There, youngster," exclaimed Black Harry, "I guess I've got you now where even Jack Hawthorne won't find ye right off, ain't I?"

"Me no tell," replied Como.

"None o' yer Injun talk here, youngster!" ejaculated the bandit. "It won't wash up here—not much! I knows ye ain't no Injun, so ye needn't take the trouble, to lie about it, or I'll strip ye an' set ye over a fire ter roast the truth outen ye."

Como turned frightfully pale at these words, but the dark stain on his face concealed the deadly pallor from the outlaw's gaze.

"Come—speak out like a man and confess that ye ain't no Injun," continued Black Harry, "or I'll make ye. Ye'd best take my advice; it's easiest in the end."

For a moment Como was silent.

Then looking up proudly he said, with a ring of disdain in his voice:

"And what of it? What difference does it make to you whether I am or am not an Injun?"

"Oh! yer a-comin' ter terms, ain't ye now? Git off'en yer horse an' make yerself as much ter hum as ye like. Ye can't get away from here 'thout gettin' a bullet through ye. I'm a-goin' ter git some grub an' then I'll tell ye why an' wot of it, youngster."

Leaving Como to his own devices the outlaw chief dismounted and disappeared in one of the adobe houses.

But presently he reappeared, and jerking his thumb toward the door said, not unkindly:

"Ef ye want some grub go in; thar's some left, I guess."

Como was hungry, and he accordingly entered the building.

There were several men there, all busily engaged in devouring what was left of the cold meal, and Como proceeded to help himself.

But his appetite was soon satisfied, and he went out again, glad to leave the close room for the pure air of the hills.

Black Harry was waiting for him, and at once motioned for him to go to where he was half stretched upon a blanket, puffing at an old clay pipe, black with age, dirt and constant use.

"Now, what's yer right name?" he said shortly, and without preamble. "Don't lie, cos I'll know ef ye do."

"Dutton," replied Como, shortly.

"Right! Wot goes in front of it? Wot's yer fust name?"

"Charles."

"Wrong, youngster. Don't lie. Ye see, I know already purty much about ye. Try agin."

"My first name is Charles. I have not lied to you," replied Como.

"Wrong agin. Ye see, I know better."

Como shrugged his shoulders.

"Hev ye got a sweetheart somewhere in ther East, youngster?"

Como started violently, but made no answer.

"Ain't there a purty little gal wot's alongin' ter see ye—eh?"

Como breathed freer. He even smiled a little, but before he could respond, Black Harry continued:

"And don't she write letters to ye once in the while, and when she does, don't she begin 'em by sayin' 'Darlin' Frankie,' eh?"

Como nodded.

"Hev ye got a father, 'darlin' Frankie,' eh?"

"Why do you ask that question?" asked Como, in reply.

"Ter git an answer, ye fool! Thet's wot I'm agoin' ter ax 'em all fur, an' ef ye don't answer, I'll roast ye. Now answer that one."

For a moment Como was silent.

Then a thought came to him like a flash of light.

He would answer the outlaw's questions, and in such a way that he would get the very information he hoped for.

By that means the captive would gain time, much time, he hoped, during which he would be free from molestation, with

the possibility that he would either find some means of escape or that Jack would come to his rescue.

To him in the position in which he found himself, time was everything, and he desired most of all to be let severely alone by the motley crew around him.

"If I answer all of your questions truthfully and satisfactorily, what then?" he asked, looking the outlaw in the eye.

"Why, then," returned Harry, "if things is ez I think they air ye kin hev thet furthest shanty to sleep in; ye kin hev all ye want ter eat, an' do ez ye dârned please, all but git away—an' ef ye don't I'll roast ye."

"Very well. I have a father."

"Is he rich?"

"He is."

"Very rich?"

"Yes, very rich."

"Does he know where ye air?"

"No."

"Would he like ter know?"

"Yes, I think he would."

"Does he dote on ye any?"

"He was very fond of me."

"Good! Ef he knowed ye war here an' that ye war goin' ter be roasted, would he pay ter git ye out thout bein' singed?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Hey?"

"He certainly would."

"Kin ye write?"

"I can."

"Well, write an' tell him thet Black Harry's got ye—thet yer a-goin' ter be roasted at ther end o'—let me see—say three months. Thet's time enough—"

"Go on."

"But thet he can save yer fur jest—say, how rich is he?"

"I don't know."

"Well, say ten thousand dollars. If he'll send thet air little boodle ter me ye kin go; if he don't, ye'll roast. Ketch on, youngster?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Will ye write the letter?"

"Yes."

"When."

"Now—if you have pen and paper."

"Whew! Say, it won't take but a day or so; I'll send for some."

"No; never mind. I have a pencil, which will do as well."

Some paper was finally found, and also an envelope which had not been used, and Como went to the shanty which Black Harry had said should be his to write his letter.

Here is what he wrote:

"MY VERY DEAR FATHER.—I am compelled to write this letter, else I would not, for it is best that you should not know of my whereabouts. The writing and sending will give me three months' time to escape from my captors, who think I am asking you to send a large amount of money here to ransom me. At the end of three months, if I have not escaped, I shall be no more. It would, perhaps, be as well so. You probably do not care to know where I am, unless it would enable you to bring me to your wishes; but the post-mark will tell you nothing, for it is three hundred miles from here to the nearest post-office. Good-by. I shall not write again. FRANKIE."

The letter was sealed and addressed.

Como handed it to Black Harry, who transferred it to his messenger whose duty it was to post it.

"Did yer tell yer dad whar ter meet my agent three months from to-day?" he asked of Como.

"I did all that was necessary," replied the youth.

"Good! that settles it! Now, youngster, ye kin do as ye please fur three months, except leave. That ye can't do. At the end o' three months ye kin either leave 'r be roasted, accordin' as yer dad desires."

CHAPTER XI.

SAWED OFF SAM'S STORY

As soon as night began to fall Como retired to the adobe hut which had been assigned to him.

It was a very small affair, containing but one room, one door and an aperture which was called a window, but which was little more than a loophole.

Carefully closing the door and fastening it, the youth proceeded to hang a blanket over the so-called window, so that no ray of light could steal out and prying eyes could not peer in.

Then from one of his pockets he produced the half of the candle which he had used in Jack's cave, and in another moment he had lighted it.

In one corner of the hut was a roughly constructed bed of skins and blankets, and this he proceeded to examine carefully, glancing nervously around him the while as if in fear of interruption.

Strange conduct for a boy, but then he was strange and different from most boys.

At length, when satisfied of his surroundings, he knelt down beside the couch, and, clasping his hands, prayed.

Prayed fervently and long; prayed with all the pent-up sorrow and anguish of his heart and soul.

He prayed for the father to whom he had just written; he prayed for Jack and others; for his own freedom from the outlaw who had made him prisoner.

But the strength and fervor of his prayer was that Black Harry and his lawless followers might never know his real identity—the identity which was hidden beneath the stain upon his face and costume he wore.

But why should the strength of his prayer be thus?

Reader, have you not guessed?

Como's real name was not Charles Francis Dutton, but Charlotte Frances Dutton.

Como was not a youth, but a girl.

Helpless and alone in the power of unprincipled bandits, is it strange that she prayed for any fate rather than that they should know her as she was—a girl?

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" she murmured, when her prayer was finished, "did you but know of my peril you would move heaven and earth to fly to my rescue. But, alas! you know even less concerning me than this uncouth ruffian who has brought me here."

"But Jack will not hesitate to fly to Como's aid any more than he would, did he know that Como was Frances Dutton—a girl."

Could she have seen Jack at that moment, she would have felt new courage, for he was galloping over the plain, followed by seven of his most trusted men, hot upon the trail left by Black Harry and his bandits.

When he flew to descend the ladder and found it missing from its place, his first thought was that he was again at the mercy of the outlaws.

He listened and watched, and waited, but no sound broke the stillness of the cave—no sign of other presence than his own was given.

At length he began to examine more closely, and finally becoming satisfied that he was indeed alone, he lighted a match and once more ignited the candle which he had extinguished upon going into the lookout.

By the light thus afforded, he could see the ladder at the bottom of the ledge of rocks which it was used to surmount.

A more careful and thorough inspection revealed scratches upon the rock where it had slipped down, and Jack soon became entirely satisfied that it had slipped from its place and fallen with the aid of hands.

It was quite a jump down to the bottom, fully twelve feet or more, and the spot where he must alight was of solid rock, but he did hesitate.

Carefully measuring the distance with his eyes, and calculating to a nicety the shock he would receive, he sprang out and down.

The next instant he was upon his feet and hurrying through the cavern toward the house.

To call such of his men together as he wanted, to saddle Lightning and mount was but the work of a few moments, and he dashed away over the plain in pursuit of the outlaws.

The trail was readily found, for they had taken no pains to conceal it, and then the pursuers dashed away upon the chase as though they were themselves pursued.

But Black Harry and his men had just two hours and a half the start of Jack, and a galloping horse can cover a great deal of ground in that time.

So it was that Como's captors reached their headquarters before sundown, while Jack was still galloping over the plains at dusk.

A pursuing party who is following a trail, cannot make as good time as the party which is fleeing from them, try as they may, for frequent halts have to be made in order that the trail may not be lost.

But Jack stuck to it valiantly until it became so dark that he could be no longer sure of his course.

His early training among the Indians had made him an adept at the art of trailing, which is fast becoming one of the lost sciences, as civilization creeps westward.

Of the seven men who had accompanied our hero in this chase Sawed-off Sam was one.

True, he could not yet use his wounded knee, and he had to be assisted on and off his horse, but he said when Jack advised him to remain behind:

"Ye know, sonny, I can't, an' thet's all about it. I ain't no yarthly good o-lyin' hyer a-doin' nothin', and when ye tell me thet thar's a-scrappin' match a-tween ye an' them pesky varmints, I can't keep still nohow, an' don't ye go fur ter make me try. I'm a-goin' with ye, Jack."

And go he did.

And when night overtook them, they camped upon the trail where they were, picketing their horses and building no fire, for fear of attracting attention.

"Boyees," said Sawed-off Sam, as they were arranging their blankets for the night: "I feel jist like tellin' a story, if ye've a mind to listen."

The proposition met with approval at once, and Sawed-off began.

"Wot I'm agoin' ter tell ye is true," he said, "an' ef any feller hyer don't believe it, he's gotter fight in the mornin'."

"Once upon a time, nigh on to twenty years ago—the exact date don't make no difference—I was actin' as er guide, an' scout, an' hunter fur a train o' three waggins wot war headin' down the ole Santa Fe trail.

"I ain't got no memory fur names, so I don't remember who the people in the waggins war, only thet thar war two fellers in the fust two waggins wot war rather curiously related. They war brothers an' yet they hed different names—half brothers, they called it.

"Well, they both hed their families with 'em, of course, an' one had two boys an' t'other had two girls, aged about alike.

"The other waggin war no relation to the two first, but had j'ined 'em on the frontier jist afore startin'.

"Thar war no kids in thet waggin 'cept a boy, an' he war a daisy!

"A two-year-ole, an' es bright es a dollar.

"Well, thet air kid, young es he war, seemed to 'preciate me, fur he war never so happy es when I had him.

"Somehow 'r other, I got sorter 'tached ter thet air kid, same's he hed ter me, an' I used ter tote him around with me considerable.

"Wal, one day we found a nice place ter camp, an' es the stock war sorter tired, we concluded ter lay to an' rest for a few days.

"Meat war a gettin' skerce, an' so I started out ter hunt fur some, an' thet air kid yelled so ter go with me thet, thinkin' I wouldn't go but a little ways anyhow, I took nim along.

"Es luck would hev it, I got stampeded by a herd o' bufflers, an' it took me all day an' night, purty near, ter git back ter whar I'd left ther waggins.

"'Twas jist afore daylight in the mornin' that I kim in sight of 'em, an' thar was the hull three ablazin' away like mad—on fire, ye know.

"Apaches, sez I.

"Wot ter do, I didn't know. Ef it warn't fur the kid I kud asailed in, but I couldn't drag him inty a row—he wasn't old enough.

"But I hed a hoss wot was a hoss, an' a bright idea kim ter me.

"I jist tied thet air kid onto the saddle an' picketed the hoss with a hull length o' lariat, an' crept toward the waggins alone.

"But bless ye, it warn't no sort o' use. When I got to the waggins the reds had been gone an hour.

"Two of the men—one o' the brothers an' ther kid's dad—war laid out cold; likewise ther kid's mother.

"The other man, the two women an' the four kids war missin'. The stock war druv off, an' nothin' war left wuth mentionin', except me an' ther kid.

"Wal, I squinted around a bit, an' then sez I: Sawed-off, ye're got a kid onto yer hands; wot'r ye goin' ter do with it?

"Dunno, sez Sawed-off.

"Keep it, sez I, an' we agreed.

"So I'd started back ter where I'd left my hoss, thinkin' I'd make tracks fur the east with the kid an' git somebody ter take care of it.

"Waal, I found the hoss whar I'd left him, but, gentlemen, thet air kid war gone.

"I had left him tied to ther saddle, and ther hoss war thet free with his heels thet he wouldn't 'low nothin' livin' 'cept me ter go nigh him.

"But ther kid war gone, and ther hoss didn't seem ter know it neither.

"Now, boyees, ever since thet air night I've hed a purpose in life, an' it's ter find thet air kid.

"Hev any o' you fellers spotted him?"

"Wot was his name?" asked one.

"His name was Jack—same's Jack Hawthorne's."

"Did he have a mark on him anywhere that you would remember?" asked Jack.

"Thet he had, fur I put it there myself—'Little Jack' on one of his arms."

"Sawed-off Sam," said Jack, rising, and greatly agitated, "I have that mark, and I can remember much of the story as you tell it, though I never remembered it till now."

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMBUSH

Sawed-off Sam had leaped to his feet in amazement.

"So you're my kid!" he cried. "Well—well—well. I allers said ye war a kid to be proud of! Whew!"

"Tell me," said Jack, "can you not remember the name of my family now? Was it not Hawthorne?"

"Sure 'nuff! Thar war sich a name es thet in ther train, an' it must ha' been yourn."

"You say my parents were both killed?"

"Ye—up! dead as herrin's."

"And the others; did you ever hear anything more of those who were carried into captivity?"

"Nary word."

And while the others present rolled themselves in their blankets and were soon wrapped in slumber, Jack and Sam talked on far into the night.

But Sam possessed very little information, more than Jack already knew, and so they also finally forgot the event except in dreams.

At dawn they were again astir, and the trail was taken up after a frugal breakfast, their horses starting at a rapid lope over the plain.

They could plainly see the hills ahead of them, and Jack rightly conjectured that they would find the outlaws intrenched in some fastness there.

By and by the mouth of the canyon became visible, and Jack raised his eyes from the trail.

"They have gone through that canyon," he said. "We must look out for an ambush now, for Black Harry knows me well enough to know that I will follow on his trail."

"Haden't we better wheel off to the right 'r left an' wait fur night?" asked Sam.

"A good idea! Yes, we will do it," replied Jack, guiding his horse to the left. "I should have thought of that before."

"Time enough now," said Sam.

"I hope so," replied Jack; "but they may have seen us already, and in that case, they will be ready for us."

They found another and smaller canyon further to the west, and there dismounted to await the coming of the night, under cover of which Jack hoped to be able to creep upon the outlaws unawares.

* * * * *

It was nearly noon of that day in Black Harry's camp when a horseman came riding in, his steed covered with foam.

"He's coming," he said laconically to the chief.

"What! already?"

"Yes."

"Making straight fur the kenyon?" asked Black Harry.

"No. He has wheeled off west'ard, an' disappeared behind a bluff," was the reply.

"Um! waitin' fur night, I s'pose. How many men has he got with him?"

"Seven or eight; I couldn't see very well ter count."

"And I've got about a dozen. Well, Mr. Jack Hawthorne, I think yer a walkin' into a mare's nest, thet's wot I think. Anyhow, I know a leetle trick wat'll do you an' yer cussed gang up in fine shape 'thout much trouble fur me, nuther."

The outlaw chief was at once all energy. He called his men around him and told them that Jack Hawthorne was below, hiding in a gulch farther up, and that at night he would no doubt attempt to creep in upon them.

"Now I've jest got a little pickle in brine fur him," he continued, "an' it's this wise:

"'bout half way between here an' the mouth of ther canyon is a narrer path whar they'll hev ter kim through one by one, as ye all know.

"Well, I'm agoin' down thar with a keg of powder, and I'm agoin' ter put it under that boulder thet lies jist over the nar-rer pass.

"Thet'll shet ther gate on 'em so's they can't git out, an' all you fellers hev ter do is ter shoot 'em down like so many bufflers. They can't run ef ther gate is shet, and they can't come up the canyon fast enough to do us any damage.

"I wants Jack Hawthorne alive, ef we kin ketch him, but ef I can't, why I wants him dead; ketch on?"

Thus he continued laying his plans for the annihilation of Jack and his followers.

He either did not notice Como was near by drinking in every word that he uttered, or if he noticed it he did not think it worth remarking.

Be that as it may, Como was near by, and he—we will continue to refer to him as a boy—took pains to lose no word that passed concerning the outlaw's plans.

Como, as he listened, suddenly thought of a way in which he could foil Black Harry and save Jack from certain death.

It was a desperate chance, and one in which his own life was at stake with fearful odds against him, but he did not hesitate.

It was the only chance, and if he forfeited his life, he felt that he could save Jack's.

He was resolved to give them a warning in time to defeat the bandit's plans.

The day wore on and night drew near.

Black Harry and his men were busy making their preparations for the ambuscade.

The powder had been placed under the boulder, and the fuse attached to it in readiness to ignite.

The men were posted further up the canyon, armed, and in waiting to send their leaden hail hurtling towards the venture-some pursuers.

* * * * *

Daylight faded into twilight, and twilight into darkness.

The darkness deepened almost to blackness, for clouds obscured the moon and stars.

It was ten o'clock when Jack, followed by his picked men, all on foot, left their hiding place in the gulch, and made their way rapidly towards the outlaw's retreat.

Not a word was spoken—not a sound was made of any kind.

As silently as a band of spirits they stole along in Indian file, skirting the base of the hills towards the big canyon.

Jack felt some misgivings as to the outcome of the expedition.

He knew that he had approached the place too boldly during the day, and that if Black Harry had a sentinel on the lookout there was not the slightest doubt but that they had been seen and reported.

If that were the case it meant an ambuscade, and for such a predicament he felt that he must be constantly on his guard.

The canyon was reached and entered, and there Jack paused.

"Men," he said, "I am going on ahead, when you have counted ten, slowly, one of you follow; then count ten more, and another, and so on until you are all on the move.

"Be in readiness with your weapons, and if you shoot, shoot to kill."

Then he started on alone, resorting to his hands and knees as a means of locomotion, as being safer in the black darkness of the canyon and more noiseless.

Presently he reached the narrow pass to which Black Harry had referred, and over which he was at that very moment hovering ready to touch a light to the fuse connecting with the powder barrel.

Suddenly he felt an uncontrollable desire to sneeze. He tried to repress it, but could not.

It burst forth with a noise which, in the stillness of the canyon, seemed tenfold its real volume.

Then there was a quick flash overhead, followed instantly by the falling of a heavy body through the air.

It struck Jack upon the shoulder and knocked him down.

A loud yell told him that it was one of the outlaws, and he sprang upon and grappled with him.

A moment of intense struggling. Then a terrible report.

The powder keg had exploded, and Jack and the outlaw were directly beneath the spot where the bowlder must fall.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGURE ON THE CLIFF.

For several seconds after the explosion which hurled the outlaw down full upon the head and shoulders of Jack Hawthorne, neither of them realized exactly what had occurred, and Jack less so than Black Harry.

The first instinct of our hero was to seize upon the being who had so unceremoniously thrust himself upon him; the first idea of the outlaw was to rise and flee as quickly as possible, for if he knew anything at all he knew he had fallen into the very hands of those whom he was most anxious to destroy.

By a miracle, neither were hurt beyond the consequences of the violent jarring they had received.

With a quick and muscular motion, Jack turned under the outlaw and threw his arms around his neck, drawing his head down close to himself, and holding him there, helpless, in spite of his violent efforts to escape.

Black Harry struggled and swore, and strove to get at the weapons in his belt, but all to no purpose.

He could tear himself loose from the vise-like coil around his neck, which held him powerless.

But neither could Jack get at his weapons.

Did he loosen one of his arms from around the outlaw's neck long enough to draw a weapon, it would also enable Black Harry to draw his, and then the combat would be unequal, because Jack was the "under dog," so to speak.

Men under such circumstances think very quickly—the mind is abnormally active.

Jack knew that the men he had brought with him were far enough behind to have escaped any serious consequences of the explosion—at least, the greater number of them were.

Would they be frightened and run away, or would they hasten forward to his rescue?

He did not know.

Time alone could tell.

But he resolved to hold his prisoner as he had him and wait.

The huge rock which had toppled over into the narrow defile had proven to be too large to fill up the pass as Black Harry had intended.

It had, on the contrary, wedged itself into the narrow space as firmly as though it had grown there, but there remained a space between it and the bottom of the pass fully four feet high.

It was just at the upper end of the space so left that Jack and Black Harry were lying.

Jack, as has been said, was on his back with the outlaw's head drawn tightly to him, and they were lying just under the edge of the rock.

Consequently he could see upwards against the strip of sky over his head.

Suddenly he could see something protruding over the edge of the cliff above him.

It was the head of a human being.

What would he not have given at that moment to have been rid of the cumbersome outlaw?

But it was not to be.

Slowly but surely the strange head projected further out, then the shoulders followed.

Then the entire body appeared in full view for a moment, and Jack knew that the unknown person was making his way slowly and laboriously down the face of the cliff.

He was clinging to the crevices and projections as best he

could, and every instant coming nearer and nearer to them as they lay there under the edge of the rock.

That the approaching person was an enemy—one of the outlaws—Jack did not for a moment doubt.

"The one who was with this fellow to set off the mine," he thought rapidly to himself, "and now that all is so silent here he is coming down to find out what has become of the one I am hugging so affectionately.

"Well, let him come. Perhaps by the time he gets here some of my boys will be on hand to welcome him, and if not, it makes no difference, as I can see. I can't get away from this fellow any more than he can get away from me, and something may turn up at the last moment to simplify matters."

He did not dare call out to his companions, believing that the warning would reach many ears besides those for whom it was intended.

All the could do was to wait, wait.

Waiting is a most unpleasant occupation at best, but when one expects the outcome of it to be anything but pleasant and gratifying, it is almost maddening.

The approaching figure was obliged to make the descent with great care, and therefore very slowly; but it seemed to Jack that he could scarcely move at all.

Frequently there would be long pauses when he seemed to be resting and recovering his breath, and then he would start on again, but only to once more pause.

Why did he stop so often? Surely he could not put himself out of breath so easily.

Was it to listen?

Ay, that must be it, and Jack wondered if he could hear any signs of his own followers.

Suddenly a piece of stone was dislodged from its place by the descending figure, and it fell squarely upon the back of Black Harry's head.

The outlaw, astonished out of his caution by the accident, uttered a loud exclamation of pain.

The figure upon the face of the cliff, still a number of feet above them, started violently.

So violently, in fact, that the hold upon the projections was lost.

For an instant he grasped wildly around him to save himself from falling, but it was useless.

Then, as if realizing that he must fall and resolving to make the best of it, he sprang out into the air.

Jack saw it all and it was lucky he did, for he saw that the stranger was going to alight upon them.

With a violent effort he threw his own body from beneath that of the outlaw, as the figure fell.

He was just in time.

Both of the stranger's feet landed full in Black Harry's back, knocking the wind out of him effectually.

In an instant Jack was upon his feet, and in the same instant his weapons were ready for use.

"Hands up, and no noise!" he ordered in a low tone, "or you are a dead man!"

He was but little prepared for the surprise which awaited him.

"Jack!" exclaimed a familiar voice out of the darkness, and speaking in the same low tone he had employed; "Jack, is it indeed you?"

"What! Como?" was Jack's elated response.

"Yes, Como."

At that instant the outlaw sighed. He was returning to consciousness.

Without pausing for further conversation, Jack fell upon his knees by Black Harry and whispered in his ear:

"If you utter a sound or attempt to escape I will instantly kill you without mercy. I am Jack Hawthorne, and you know that I will keep my word. Will you obey?"

"I'm as dumb as an oyster," replied the outlaw.

"Good! I will relieve you of any dangerous weapons you may happen to have on your person."

In another moment he had searched the prisoner and taken away every weapon that he possessed.

"Now come with me," he said, "and I will see what is best to be done with you."

"There are two of us here, my man, and you will find it greatly to your advantage not to try on any monkey business, because it won't work, and you will only be left behind a corpse for your pains."

With one hand upon the outlaw's shoulder and with Como bringing up the rear they began to make their way beneath the huge rock towards the spot where Jack had left his followers.

"The main purpose of this expedition is accomplished," thought Jack, as he crept along, "but shall I let it rest here, or shall I go on while I have got such a good start and exterminate this nest of vermin?"

"Ah, well! I will leave it to the boys to decide; it shall be as they say. If they have got enough and want to go back, all right, but I think we had better stay now and see the thing out."

So thinking, he made his way onward down the canyon.

CHAPTER XIV.

JUDGE LYNCH.

Jack and the outlaw chief, Black Harry (although our hero as yet had no idea that it was the chief he had captured), closely followed by Como, had barely passed from beneath the huge rock which had been thrown into the pass by the explosion, when they found themselves in the presence of Jack's men.

They had been creeping cautiously forward, reconnoitering, when they heard the three approaching, and had waited in order to ascertain who it was that was coming towards them.

After a short whispered colloquy they all proceeded towards the mouth of the canyon, where they could discuss matters with less chance of being surprised, and consequently with more freedom.

Black Harry was quickly bound and gagged to prevent his giving the alarm to his companions.

"Now, boys," said Jack, "what shall we do? Shall we wipe out Black Harry and his gang and leave them to the tender mercies of fate, now that we have got Como back again?"

"What d'ye say, Jack?" asked one of them.

"I say stay and finish the job," replied Jack. "We've made a good start, and there is no reason why we can't scatter them now so that they will be easy handling afterwards."

"On the other hand, if we draw off now, they will only make themselves the stronger, and we will have to do the work over again that we have already done. I say stay and go for them."

"And I!"

"And I!"

"And I—I—I!"

The decision was unanimous.

"Let's have a look at this 'ere feller," exclaimed one of them at that point. "Mebby we kin get him to give us some pinters."

Black Harry was rolled over and a lighted match was soon blazing in his face.

"Black Harry, by thunder!" exclaimed the man who held the match, dropping it in his surprise.

"I am not greatly astonished," said Jack, "for I half suspected it. However, it is agreeable news just the same. Take the gag out of his mouth and we will see if we can make him talk."

The gag was accordingly removed and the outlaw placed in a sitting position.

"Well, ye young devil; got me agin, ain't ye?" he growled.

"Yes," replied Jack, "and this time we propose to make short work of you."

"How so?"

"This way: When daylight comes we are going to string you up and leave you dangling at the end of a rope, where your friends can see you. How do you like the prospect?"

"Better'n bein' in your company anyhow, which ain't sayin' much."

"There's one way, Harry, in which you may avoid it."

"How's that?"

"By telling us how we can get to your camp up there and gobble the rest of them."

"Oh!"

"Exactly!"

"Ye want me ter put ye on to the little racket wat'll give my pards away, do ye?"

"In plain English that's just what we want."

"An' s'posen I do—wot then?"

"We won't hang you."

"Oh, ye'll let somebody else have the fun, eh?"

"No, you won't be hung."

"Thet's kind. Wot will ye do with me?"

"We'll leave you here bound and gagged until we get back. If you have lied to us or attempted to send us into any traps we will hang you, but if you have told us the truth you shall go free on condition that you leave this part of the country for good."

"Light out fur keeps?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I'll see ye all broiled first."

"All right, Harry," said Jack. "There is nothing I like so well as a forcible expression of opinion, and we have got yours. Fetch a lariat, boys, and we'll string him up now; no use waiting for daylight."

A lariat was quickly supplied, and the noose was placed over Black Harry's head.

"Say your prayers, Harry, if you know any to say, for your time is come."

"Thar ain't nothin' ter hang me to, 'cept ther stars," replied the outlaw insolently, still putting on a bold front.

"Oh, yes, there is. There is a rock that juts out just in the mouth of the canyon which will do admirably. You probably know it."

"Fetch him along, boys."

They were not slow to obey.

Without much ado, the outlaw chief was hurried into the mouth of the canyon and the lariat thrown over the jutting rock.

"Now, Harry," said Jack, "you have got just five minutes to live. Have you got anything to say before we pull you into the air?"

"No, I ain't."

Then there was a deathlike silence, so that the ticking of Jack's watch, as he held it in his hand, could be plainly heard.

"One minute more, Harry," he said finally. "Still nothing?"

The outlaw did not reply.

"Time's up!" said Jack suddenly. "Pull away, boys."

There was a quick tightening of the lariat.

Black Harry was almost raised off from his feet.

Only the tips of his toes remained upon the ground.

He managed to gasp out a few words.

"Let me down—wait!" he said. "I will tell all I know."

Jack gave the order and the rope was again slackened.

"Speak quickly," he said sternly, "for we have no time to waste on such a vermin as you."

"Will ye let me off ef I'll tell ye how ye can gobble the gang?" moaned Black Harry.

"The conditions I offered you before are still good," returned Jack.

"Wal, I'll accept, only take this cussed thing offen my neck."

"Not yet; tell your story first."

"An' git hung arterwards."

"Pull him up, boys; I'm in no mood for fooling," said Jack.

"No—no—no—no!" exclaimed the outlaw. "Go up ther ken-yon 'bout twenty yards beyond whar the rock fell into the pass. On ther right hand side ye will find a narrer crevice or fissure. Follow thet fissure to ther top, it'll bring ye out into one of the adobe houses on the mesa. It's a private entrance only known to two besides myself an' they ain't likely ter be a usin' it."

"When ye get thar ye kin do ez ye please. Ef ye kin fight well enough, mebbey ye kin lick my fellers—ef ye can't ye'll git licked, thet's all, but thet won't be no fault o' mine."

"Of course not," asserted Jack.

"Now bind and gag me, and leave me here, an' go on with yer work, an' ef ye kin wipe out my fellers, w'y I'll leave the kentry anyhow; ef ye can't, they'll probably find me here afore you do. I've told ye how ye kin git onto the mesa, an' ye'd never git close enough ter hev a fight ef I hadn't, so I've done my part."

"One more question," said Jack. "How many men are there in your party?"

"'Bout a dozen."

"No more?"

"No—not here."

In a few moments more, Black Harry was bound and gagged in such a manner that there could be no possible chance of his liberating himself, and then the party made their way up the canyon toward the fissure he had described.

Black Harry's thoughts were evil as he saw them go, and yet there was a quality of fiendish delight in them also, for he could not help hoping that his friends would in some manner foil the designs of Jack Hawthorne.

Five minutes after their departure had scarcely elapsed, however, before a dark figure sprang up from behind a rock near by, and rushed towards him.

In an instant Black Harry's bonds were cut, and he stood up free and unfettered.

There was no time to stop for thanks.

"Quick!" he cried; "we will beat them yet. We will follow and when they have all gone into the fissure we will go on by the canyon. If we can beat them to the mesa not one of them will leave it alive—not one!"

"It was a lucky thought of mine to tell them the way, after all!"

And away they bounded, bent upon the destruction of Jack Hawthorne and his followers.

CHAPTER XV.

"LIKE RATS INTO A TRAP."

To the outlaws who frequented the canyon and the mountain passes the way to the mesa was as familiar as the by-ways of a great city are to a gamin of the streets, and thus it was that with but little effort Black Harry and his companion overtook our hero and his men by the time they had reached the huge rock.

But they took good care not to approach too near to those whom they were following.

Although it was densely dark in the canyon, still to eyes

accustomed to it they could plainly see the deeper shadows made by the stealthy moving figures ahead.

They followed them through the pass beneath the rock, and saw them enter the narrow fissure to which they had been directed.

Saw them enter to the last men; saw that they had nothing to fear from them en passant, and so they crept by.

Once past the danger point they again rose to their feet and rushed forward, heedless of the projecting rocks against which they bruised their legs and bodies and faces, in their eagerness to reach the mesa in time to warn their companions of the approaching danger, and to unite with them in one great effort to sweep the much feared Jack Hawthorne from the face of the earth forever, together with the men who were foolhardy enough to follow him and his fortunes.

Ere they had gone a hundred paces farther they were met with a sharp command to halt.

Black Harry, heedless of the consequences of listening ears, shouted out the pass-word, and in another moment in excited words he was relating all that had transpired.

"Quick now, pards!" he said in conclusion—"to the mesa, every one of you! Never mind the pass, for we have nothing to fear in this direction. They have all gone like rats into a trap, an' all we've gotter do is to spring it!"

"But stop!" he cried suddenly, before they had moved a dozen paces. "I kin spare two of ye, I guess. Two of ye climb back down the pass and see if ye can't stop up the fissure, so's they can't git out thet way if they wanten."

"Stop it up with suthin'—rocks, 'r anything ye light onto, but stop it up; then one of ye stay an' guard the place, an' t'other one kim back up hyar with us."

They obeyed with alacrity, and the outlaws again hurried toward the mesa, less two of their number.

* * * * *

We must return to Sawed-off Sam for a moment.

As the reader knows, he came with Jack to the foot-hills upon his own earnest request.

When, however, the little party went into camp in the smaller canyon farther along, to wait the darkness for the rest of their work, Jack would not hear of Sam's attempting to go farther than that with him.

"No, Sam," he had said, "You're not fit to go, and are not in a fit condition to fight, for if we should get the worst of it and have to use our legs, you would either get left or we would have to carry you. Now, none of us would relish that job, and so you have got to stay here."

"Somebody ought to remain to guard the horses anyway, and under the circumstances, you are just the man for the job."

"I am captain here, and my orders are that you remain and guard the animals; we will do the fighting if there is any to be done, and when you get your legs under you again, you can do something to make up for lost time."

Sawed-off Sam was greatly disappointed, for he dearly loved a fight, but he had sense enough to see that the young commander was right, and so he acquiesced with as good grace as he could.

"Say, boyees," he said, as they were departing, "save one o' ther cussed critters fur me, will ye? Jes' fetch him hyer alive an' let me fight him. Cos I've gotter hev a scrimmage somehow 'r I'll bust."

When they were gone he lighted his pipe and sat down ruefully to bemoan his fate.

"Left like a cussed pappoose Injun," he muttered, "ter watch over a lot o' four-legged hosses, jes' cos I got er chunk of lead in myknee, an' I cud lick any three o' ther fellers wot Jack took with him this minit."

"An' thet air boyee; he'll go an' git a cussed hole through

his carcass jes cos I jes' found him, arter all these years o' lookin' fur him, too—it's mean, by thunder, it's mean!"

Then he puffed away at his pipe for awhile in silence.

But ever and anon he would break out again into further invective against the run of luck which had made it necessary for him to remain behind, until finally he worked himself into a fever of excitement that he could hardly bear.

Nearly two hours had passed and then he heard the dull boom of the explosion of the keg of powder.

"Wot's thet?" he exclaimed. "By thunder, ef I don't b'lieve them cussed cut-throats hev got'er cannon up there, an' air atryin' ter shoot my boyee. I can't stand thet, nohow!"

A sudden idea took possession of the tough old frontiersman.

Quickly unpicketing his horse, he managed with considerable difficulty to mount him, and then he rode him out of the canyon, and turned in the direction which the others had taken.

Two or three times he halted or listened, and never once did he allow the horse to go faster than a walk, mentally bewailing that he was not able to go afoot, and thus avoid the noise which the horse's hoofs made.

The time consumed by Sawed-off in thinking it over and the slowness of his progress was fortunate for all concerned, for he entered the canyon just after Black Harry had been released by his friend.

Urging the horse slowly ahead, and yet allowing him to pick his own way, he continued on, until suddenly the horse came to a standstill and refused to go further.

"Wot's this?" muttered Sam. "Must be ther end o' the cussed hole. W'y don't they hev a light when they expect visitors? But, hole on; mebby they don't expect any. Anyway, I'll excuse 'em. I wonder 'f I cud git down offen this animile?"

He slid from the saddle to the ground, alighting upon his uninjured leg, seemingly totally unmindful of the pain in the other one.

Leaving the horse to care for himself, Sam crawled forward, and soon discovered that there was a way under the rock.

Without hesitating he dragged his body through the pass to the other side, feeling certain that his friends had gone through before him.

What struck him as strange was that not a sound smote his ears.

He had confidently expected to hear the sound of desultory firing when he got near enough, and he judged that he must by that time have reached a point where, if there was firing going on above, he could hear it.

But everything was as still as though he were the only being in the hills.

But stop!

Sawed-off Sam suddenly pricked up his ears—if I may use the phrase.

He had heard a sound.

Placing his ear against the hard rock beneath him he listened attentively.

"Two of 'em," he muttered, "an' a-comin' this 'ere way. Friends 'r foes, I wonder? I wish thet cussed animile t'other side o' thet rock war—well, in t'other kenyon jes now, 'cos ef them fellers ain't friends, w'y they're enemies, thet's all, an' ef they find thet air animile, es they're sure ter do if they get far enough—. Hello! They've stopped!"

He waited for a moment, and then he could plainly hear subdued voices in conversation and now and then the sound of stones coming together.

"One thing's sure," thought Sam, "they ain't much afeared o' bein' overheard, an' another thing's equally sartin, they're a-pilin' up stones fur some purpose 'r other.

"I've gotter find out wot they're up to fur sure."

He crept forward slowly, using all the caution which long experience had taught him.

Presently he was close enough to hear the words which passed between the two men.

The first words he heard startled him.

"They're in there, sure enough," said one of the men. "and they've got to come out at one end or the other. Well, they can't come out more than two at a time here with all them stones piled in there. Every mother's son of 'em has got to go under for sure."

"Suppose that they have heard us here and know what we are up to, and refuse to come out at either end?" asked the other.

"Then we'll smoke 'em out."

And so on, until Sam understood the situation pretty well.

Finally the job was finished and one of the outlaws took his departure, leaving the other one alone.

"Now," thought Sam, "is my time. I must down thet feller 'thout any noise, an' then mebby I kin do suthin' fur the boyee."

The outlaw was sitting upon a rock with his back towards Sam. His shadow was just discernible to the old frontiersman.

Using all the caution of which he was master, the old hunter worked his way nearer and nearer to the unsuspecting man.

Suddenly Sam's wounded knee came into sharp contact with a stone, and in spite of himself he uttered a quick exclamation of pain.

Instantly the outlaw turned, and in the next second the two men were locked together in a silent but terrible struggle.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRANGE FIGHT

The struggle which then took place between Sawed-off Sam and the outlaw who had been left to guard the entrance to the fissure, was silent and terrible.

The outlaw knew, as did the old borderman, that it was a life and death contest—that one of them must go down before the inevitable; that only one of them could live to see the light of a new day.

Sam was at a disadvantage owing to his wound, but he never once thought of it.

Though much shorter in stature than his foe, he was broader and more firmly knit—stronger in fact.

Moreover, he was fighting for his beloved "boyees."

He had heard enough of the conversation between the two outlaws to realize that more lives than his own depended upon the struggle in which he was engaged.

He was fighting for the entire company of men who had followed gallant Jack into the canyon.

They tugged and strained, and strove with all their muscular and nerve tissues.

Sam, forgetting his wounded knee, would now and then attempt to bear his weight upon that leg.

But it would give way beneath him, and for a moment it would seem as though he must go down beneath his adversary, and meet his doom there in the darkness of the wild canyon.

Still he would recover the lost ground at the last instant, and again the two men would swing back and forth.

Both were silent, for both were afraid of calling to their presence some one or more of the friends of the other.

And so they struggled on, dependent only upon themselves for the victory.

Had the struggle taken place in the full light of the noonday, and had you, reader, been an eager spectator, you could not have replied to that question.

Methinks had Sawed-off Sam been in possession of his full

prowess, had he not received the wound in his knee, which in a great measure disabled him, he would soon have won the victory, but as it was, the natural superior strength which was his was more than counterbalanced by the infirmity, and his arms and back were forced to supply the deficiency created by his disabled leg.

At length, as if by common consent, they both paused, still, however, locked in each other's grasp, to regain their breath.

"Say, pard, who be ye, anyhow?" gasped the outlaw.

"O'm the roarin' terror from Coyote Holler, I am," gasped Sawed-off in reply, "an' I ain't no pard o' yourn, neither."

"Ye'r a tough un, an' no mistake," continued the outlaw.

"Right ye be, covey, an' ef I had two sound pins under me instead o' havin' a chunk o' lead in one o' my knees, I'd stan' ye onto yer head quicker'n yer cud say scat, you hyer me."

"Wot's thet? Air ye wounded?"

"I be."

"Bad?"

"Ball through one o' my knees."

"Sho!"

"Fact!"

"Wal, ye've got sand."

"Yew bet. Ye see, I never was borned, like most folkes; I war digged out of an ole placer mine, already growed—see?"

"Sho!"

"Fact! They sot me up onto my pins, and I sailed in an' licked the hull bilin' of 'em diggin' me out."

"You don't say so?"

"Fact!"

"Say!"

"Wat?"

"Ye kin lie a'most as good es ye kin fight, can't ye?"

"Most—not quite."

"Air ye reddy ter begin the dance agin?"

"Yew bet; wot figger's this un?"

"All han's around; ther last figger, an' I'm agoin' ter do ye."

"Air ye?" said Sam.

"I be."

"Sail in."

They sailed.

The breath they had regained and the short conversation made the fight more desperate than ever.

At length Sam began to realize that if he hoped to gain the victory he must do it by some quick stroke, for his wound was beginning to tell upon him, and he knew that his adversary would tire him out finally.

"Say!" said Sam.

"Wot?" replied the outlaw.

"Hes on a minute. I want ter ax yer suthin'." Again they paused.

"Wot d'ye say ter quittin'? asked Sam.

"Quittin', how?" returned the outlaw. "Do ye want ter give up?"

"Not much. Quit now an' I'll agree that ye shan't be hung, but if ther fight goes on I'll save ye alive and hang ye es sure's my name is——"

"Wot?"

"None o' yer durned business. Do ye accept my terms?"

"Yes—t'other way. Ye're too ke-ind, Mister Wot's-ye-name. We'll fight it out."

"All right; down ye go!" cried Sam.

Quicker than a flash of lightning he loosed his hold from around the outlaw's body, stooped, seized him by the legs, and threw him from his feet.

As he struck the rocky bottom of the canyon, Sawed-off fell on top of him, pinning him fast down.

He had him where he could not move.

Tightly clenching the fallen man by the throat with one hand, he relieved him of his weapons with the other.

Then drawing one of his own trusty revolvers, he released the fallen man's throat from his own iron grasp.

"Thar!" he said with great satisfaction. "I tole ye, didn't I?"

"Ye did, but ye didn't do the thing fair."

"I know it an' I'm sorter ashamed o' thet part of it, and I'll tell ye wot I'll do ter make it up."

"Ye see, I had ter do suthin' ter end this cussed squabble, on account o' ther fellers in ther fissure wot air all a' dependin' onto me—see?"

"Well, ef ye'll jest lay quiet like, an' not make no fuss nur try ter git away while I'm a-tyin' ye, I'll let ye loose arter ther fandango up in ther fissure, and give ye a chance ter fight it out with me, and ye shall hev fair play, too?"

"Is thet er promise?"

"It am."

"Fair an' square?"

"You bet."

"An' ef I lick ye, wot then?"

"You shall go scot free."

"Honest Injun?"

"Ye've got my word, an' I never busted it yet."

"O. K. It's agreed, pard."

"Shake."

They shook.

Then a strange thing occurred. One which the average man would say entirely out of keeping among such desperate characters.

Sawed-off Sam arose from his position atop of the outlaw, and putting his revolver coolly in his pocket, drew some tough leather thongs from one of the receptacles of his capacious coat.

The outlaw remained perfectly quiet while Sam bound his hands and feet securely, taking care to make them so secure that there was no chance of the man slipping them from his limbs and making his escape.

"Thar!" exclaimed Sam when the job was done, "that air is beautiful. Ef I should happen ter be laid out afore I git back, ye jist tell Jack thet I said ye war ter go scott free."

"Yes, but who be ye?"

"Sawed-off Sam, from——"

"Wot!" fairly yelled the bound outlaw, "Sawed-off Sam of Placer Bottom?"

"Right ye be."

"Ther biggest ole liar in ther Nevada diggin's?"

"Thet's me."

"Ther feller wot done up Sandy Alick four year ago?"

"Right agin."

"Wot uster have a pard named 'Long Tom the Terror'?"

"Yep! Blast my eyes! He war ther cussedest ole galoot in ther hull diggin's when I war there, an' he cud fight like a hull pack o' catamounts, but one day he turned up missin', an' I spent a hull year a-lookin' fur him or the feller wot laid him out, ter git squar."

"Ye did, eh?"

"I did, an' ef I cud ha' foun' out who done the biz fur Tom I'd ha' follered him close ter Jericho an' buried him."

"Sho!"

"Fact! But, I say—who be you?"

"Wa'll, Sam, ye ole pizen critter, I'm Long Tom ther Terror."

"Wot!"

It was Sam's turn to be surprised now.

"Ye heerd me, didn't ye?"

"Ye're jokin'!"

"Strike a light an' see!"

"I'll do it!"

In another instant a lighted match was held so close to the outlaw's face that he remonstrated, but the flickering light assured Sawed-off Sam that the man had told the truth.

Without a word he took out his knife and drew its sharp

edge quickly across the bonds he had so lately placed around Long Tom's wrists and ankles.

"Stan' up, Tom," he said; "ye'r free es ther air."

"Right, Sam. Wat next?"

"Wot next! W'y, ye cussed idjit, don't ye see thet we've got ter help our fellers outen this 'ere scrape. Ye ain't one o' these pizin' folks, an' I know it."

"No. I got a leg broke some time ago, an' one of 'em carried me here on his horse till ther bone growed tergether agin, an' sorter hung on, but I'm wid ye, Sam, every time."

"I knowed it—kim on; I'll hear yer story arter the ball. Here's yer weepins. Now fur ther fissure!"

"Fire away, Sam!"

In another moment, Sam, with limping step, was leading his old pard through the fissure, hurrying as rapidly as they could to overtake Jack and his party in time to save them from the trap which had been set to catch them, first knocking away the greater part of the rock barrier at the entrance to the fissure.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SURPRISE.

While the relation of the incidents in the two preceding chapters has consumed considerable time, the occurrences themselves occupied comparatively but little.

Such struggles, while they seemed long enough to those participating in them, in reality are always short and quickly settled.

Thus it was that but little time, as time is reckoned, had passed between the moments when Jack and his party entered the fissure and that when Sam and his old pard, newly found, went in, hastening to overtake them.

Nevertheless, Sawed-off was only just in time to prevent the plans of Black Harry from being carried out to the letter.

When he overtook the hindmost one of the party ahead, Jack, who was in the lead, had just reached the point where the passage led into the adobe hut on the mesa.

Be it known that the fissure did not serve as the passage entire, but that an artificial passage-way had been dug through the ground from its end to a point beneath the floor of the hut into which it opened by means of a trap door, for while boards were a rarity in that region, adobe could be utilized as well for a flooring as for the outer walls of a house.

"Pass the word along fur a halt, quick!" said Sam to the one whom he had overtaken. "Thar's danger ahead. Don't stop ter ask why now."

The word was passed, and the message came back inquiring what had happened.

"Tell Jack I want him hyer fur a minute," replied Sam.

Jack was accordingly notified, and knowing well that Sam would not call him upon a trivial matter, made haste to comply with the request, all the while wondering how Sam in his wounded condition had managed to follow them there.

"What is it, Sam?" he said, as soon as he had squeezed his way past his companions and reached the spot where Sam was awaiting him.

In as few words as possible Sam related all that had transpired, not forgetting his struggle with Tom, in which, he said, he did not hesitate to admit that he had taken a very unfair advantage of his old chum.

"This 'ere's Long Tom," he concluded, "an' he's a howlin' Terror from Terrorsville an' don't ye forget it!"

"He was abunkin' with them air critters upon ther mesa, but he ain't one of 'em, not by a cussed sight, he ain't, an' I stan' ready ter vouch fur him an' fight with ther fust galoot wot don't swaller wat I say hull, see?"

"All right, Sam; your word is plenty. Now to business. You say they are onto our game to surprise them this way; and that Black Harry has escaped. Good.

"Your friend here, Long Tom, probably knows the ropes.

"You bet."

"Well—you stay here and lead the boys through the cabin while I go with Long Tom and two or three of the men back through the fissure and up the other way, which you say has been left unguarded."

"Keyreckt!"

"Go up to the end of the passage," continued Jack, "and take your stand right under the floor of the hut; when you hear firing, lead your men through and get them all inside the hut."

"You bet."

"Then keep your eyes and ears peeled, and at the right moment come out and sail into the outlaws from behind while we are taking up their attention from the other side. Do you understand the plan?"

"I does."

"Good! then here goes!"

Calling to three of them, he requested them to follow him, and led the way, accompanied by Long Tom, back down the passage and through the fissure to carry out the plan he had mapped.

At the same time Sawed-off Sam worked his way by the others, until he found himself directly beneath the hut, with the trap door over his head.

Raising the door ever so little, he pushed the blade of his knife through the crack, thus enabling him to hear much better, and then he settled himself to wait and listen.

A full half hour went by, and still not a sound, and Sawed-off Sam was beginning to feel uneasy.

The hardest thing in life for him to withstand was inaction.

He could not bear to be idle while others were on the move, especially when there was in view the prospect of a fight.

"It's cussed mean," he grumbled. "Jack might ha' let me go with Long Tom, an' stayed hyer hisself. But ef thar's any waitin' ter be done, I've gotter do it, every time. I'll—Hello! Wat's that?"

He had heard the report of a fire-arm.

But he had no occasion to ask himself the question a second time.

The report which he had heard was quickly followed by others until they rattled away like dice in a pasteboard box.

"They're at it!" he cried. "Holy smoke, but hear 'em! Ain't it bee-eautiful? Don't I wish I war there? Kim on, boyees!"

With a quick motion he threw the trap door back, and raised himself through, rolling over and over upon the floor in his hurry to get out of the way of the others who were to come after him.

They were by no means slow in following his lead, and in less time than it takes to relate it every man of them was inside the adobe hut with weapons drawn and ready to rush outside and take part in the fight.

That had, however, now quieted down considerably, only a stray shot being heard now and then, and Sam wisely concluded that both parties had taken to cover, and were only firing when they could see something at which to shoot at.

And he was correct.

Jack and his party had stolen up through the canyon without accident, and without being discovered.

Even when they reached the mesa not a sign of the outlaws could be seen, and, putting two and two together, Jack had come to the conclusion that they were hiding behind the very hut from which he and his party were expected by them to make their appearance upon the scene.

He was enabled to conclude which cabin that was from the information which Como could give him, for Como was sure it

was the one to which he had been assigned. He had examined it too carefully before retiring.

Creeping stealthily onward, Jack and his party had finally managed to get behind one, and then by peering closely, they could discern the darker figures of several of the outlaws crouching behind the other one.

Jack could see only three of them, but directing two of his men to select two, he had taken the third, and they had fired.

The three outlaws thus exposed had dropped like logs in their tracks.

But instantly all was confusion and excitement.

The others, thinking that Jack and his party had managed to creep from the cabin undiscovered, had rushed out only to be met by a death-dealing leaden hail.

They had returned the fire as quickly as they could, with but little damage, and had then rushed back to cover behind their cabin.

It was thus that they were situated when Sawed-off and his men came through the trap door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRYING MOMENT COMES.

Suddenly Sawed-off Sam heard a shot which was so close by that it made him jump.

He almost exclaimed aloud, for the report had been close to his ear while he was attempting to peer through the wall of the hut where an imperfect stone had partially crumbled away.

"Jeehosephat!" he muttered, under his breath. "Cuss'd ef I didn't think I war shot fur a minut!"

"One o' them parties air behind this 'ere cabing—sure's death, but which? Thet air's wot I dunno. Wot's more, it's wot I must find out, cos ef it's Black Harry we kin drive 'em out, while ef it's Jack, we don't wanten do no sich trick, you bet."

He waited until he heard another shot some distance away and located it.

"That spoke from over there," he thought, "consekently the cussed varmints air a-hidin' behind the side o' ther cabing furthest from thet shot—always providin' thet it air the varmints wot air here, and Jack wot air of t'other party, an' thet's just wot I'm a-goin' ter find out ter oncet."

He crossed the cabin stealthily to the other side and began picking away slowly with his knife at an adobe stone.

His work was slow work, but he had to work slowly in order to make no noise, for if he should attract the attention of those on the outside, there was no knowing what might happen.

But the wall was thick and the stone was very hard, and after working at it for several minutes, he gave it up as impracticable.

"No use," he muttered, "it won't work. There's only one way an' thet's fur me ter go outside ter find out wot I wants ter know."

"It's sorter dangerous, but wot o' thet?"

"Boyees," he continued in a whisper, "ther outside door o' this here shebang am on the side nearest to the other party, an' I'm a-goin' out ter find out which is which."

"Mebby I'll get another hunk o' lead inter me fur my pains, an' mebbby one o' our party will put it there ef ther other fellers happen ter be ther ones behind this cabin, cos they'll think I'm one o' ther cussed varmints. But ther thing hes got ter be did, an' I'm ther feller wot's a-goin' ter do it; so here goes."

They made no effort to detain him from departure upon an errand which was almost certain death.

Every one of them saw the necessity for some such move to be made, and even if it should result in the death of one of

their number, it would be in a good cause, and life was held very lightly among them, even personally.

Sawed-off Sam opened the door slowly and carefully, taking care to make no noise.

He opened it just wide enough to allow his body to squeeze through, and then with a low "good-by, boyees," he crawled out, flat upon his belly.

It was a mode of progress with which he was perfectly familiar, for he had had occasion to use it many times among the hostiles.

He had a way of squirming noiselessly along without raising his body, and in that position he resembled more of a log of wood or stone lying upon the ground than a human being.

The greatest danger which he had to fear was that of being seen and fired upon by the party behind the other cabin; but he had to take the risk, and he took it.

But luck was with him.

They evidently did not see him.

He edged his way along with great care, finally reaching the corner of the cabin, and turning without being discovered.

Then he looked up.

At once he started, for at the other end of the cabin, creeping slowly toward the spot where he was lying, was another dark figure.

"One o' this 'ere party, whichever one it may be," thought Sam. "Shall I go ahead an' meet him half way, or shall I wait here fur him?" he asked himself.

After thinking the matter over for an instant, he resolved to continue on his way, and meet the one who was approaching.

"Ef it's one o' the cussed varmints, I'll try an' pass off fur one o' them wat's gone around the hut ther 'tother way," he thought.

So he continued on his way.

Suddenly the man who was creeping towards him discovered that he was not alone on that side of the cabin.

He paused and raised himself upon his knees, gazed a moment in evident perplexity, and then as if having arrived at a satisfactory conclusion, again dropped flat and crept onward towards Sam.

"He's a-comin'," said Sam to himself, "es sure's guns. Wal, I'm ready fur him, an' if I don't make him weary my name's not Sawed-off."

Both men continued to advance until they were within a foot of each other. Sam being careful to keep his face close to the ground.

"I say," muttered the stranger, "you're a creeper from Creepersville, ain't you?"

"You bet," replied Sam, muffling his voice in the grass under his face.

"Ye must ha' started 'fore I did," he continued.

"Nary a start," replied Sam.

"Anything around on ther front side?" was the next remark.

"Nothin'!"

"Door open?"

"Wide open."

"Anybody inside?"

"Nixie."

"Then thar ain't no use in my going any further and riskin' a lead pill, is there? You've found out all thet Harry wanted ter know, ain't ye?"

"I hev."

The last remark told all Sam that he wanted to know.

But it told him more, for by it he knew that one of the outlaws was creeping along behind him somewhere, and might at any moment overtake him, especially if he prolonged the present conversation any further.

In that case he would find himself in a tight fix.

Realizing it, he made a sudden and desperate resolve.

"Let's go back your way," he muttered.

"O. K. I'm agreeable," replied the outlaw, but he did not move.

"Well, go on then," said Sam gruffly.

Then the fellow seemed still to hesitate, but only for a moment.

Turning, he began creeping the other way.

It was the opportunity which Sam wanted.

Rising with a quick motion he threw himself upon the outlaw, jamming his head deep into the grass and dirt beneath them.

At the same instant he raised his revolver in his other hand and brought it down with terrific force upon the outlaw's cranium.

The only sound that was made in the short struggle was of the blow with the butt of Sam's revolver.

As for Black Harry's man, he was rendered instantaneously senseless.

"So far so good," muttered Sam, as he started to arise after dealing the terrible blow.

But a hand was placed on his shoulder, and a voice said in his ear:

"What has happened?"

In an instant Sam realized that the outlaw who had gone the other way around the hut had arrived.

Turning like a flash his fist shot out, striking the new-comer fairly in the stomach and doubling him up like a jack-knife.

But the blow was not sufficient to silence him.

He gave one terrific yell, which sounded in the stillness of the night like a hundred voices.

Instantly all was commotion, and Sawed-off Sam knew that the trying moment had come at last.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WILD CHARGE.

The trying moment had arrived.

The moment when the battle was to wage fierce and terrible for awhile, then to die away to leave one party victorious over the others.

But which?

Of the two parties opposed to each other in that conflict which must succeed?

Would Might triumph over Right, or would the right prevail?

Who can answer?

To Sawed-off Sam, crippled though he was, there did not seem a doubt?

To him it was preordained that he should be on the winning side in every battle, for he was one of the kind who could turn defeat into victory many times even with the odds greatly against him.

When the outlaw uttered the terrible yell which startled everybody within hearing, the brave borderman did not pause to repeat the blow.

He knew full well that the outlaw was beyond doing any mischief for some time to come.

With a cry of defiance he leaped over his prostrate body, past the corner of the hut, shouting as he did so:

"Don't shoot, boys, till I git inside ther shanty."

They must have both heard and recognized his voice, for although he could easily have been shot down from the other cabin, not a ball was fired at him, so that he reached the door and passed inside in safety.

"That's done!" he cried, as he barred the door behind him; "an' now to work. Them cussed varmints air all around this

ere shebang, an' ther fust thing fur us to do es to manufacture some loopholes ter shoot through."

Lying on the floor, just inside the door, was a piece of timber, evidently a part of some ill-fated plain wagon.

Seizing it, Sam employed it as a battering ram, and began at once jamming a hole through the side of the hut.

It did not take long with such a formidable weapon, and soon one of the stones fell outward, leaving a large square hole.

It had scarcely fallen from its place, however, when there was a loud report, and a bullet whizzed unpleasantly close to Sam's ear.

"Whew!" he whistled; "they're in fightin' trim, anyhow!"

Leaving the loophole thus created, he moved farther along the wall, and began making another, taking care this time, however, to keep out of the reach of bullets when the work was nearly completed.

It was well that he did, for again there was a loud report, and a bullet buried itself in the opposite wall.

"Them fellers air party fly, anyhow," said the borderman, sotto voce, "but now I guess I'll take a turn."

Suiting the action to the word, he fired his own revolver through the opening, and then with a quick motion sprang forward and thrust his hand through.

He fired two shots each way along the outside wall before he drew it in again, and he knew, if any one was concealed there he came unpleasantly close to them.

It was a reckless thing to do, to thrust his hand through in the manner he did, for ten to one he would get a ball through it.

His luck, however, seemed to be in the ascendant, for though a bullet from one of the outlaws struck the barrel of his revolver, he was himself unhurt.

Quickly leaping to the other loophole he repeated the experiment there, with very much the same effect as before, although this time even his own weapon was not struck.

Posting one of the men at one of the loopholes and himself taking the other, they kept up this desultory sort of firing for some time.

Suddenly, however, there came a wild shout from without.

They heard the rushing of hurrying feet, then an answering cry of defiance from the direction of the other cabin.

"They grabbed ther bison by ther horn!" cried Sawed-off, greatly excited. "Kim on, boyees, they think they're agoin' ter down us by numbers, but they don't know that ole Sawed-off's here!"

With a wild leap, or rather lerp, for he could scarcely use his disabled leg at all now, he sprang through the door uttering a loud cry as he went.

"Durned if they didn't fire ther cabing afore they left," he cried.

It was true enough.

The roof of the cabin where Sawed-off had been with his detachment of the men was made of prairie grass, and it had become dry and exceedingly inflammable.

Realizing this, as well as that the light thus created would be of material benefit to him in the coming fight, Black Harry had touched a match to it just before making the rush.

It blazed up almost instantly, with a brilliant flame which lighted the surrounding scene weirdly and beautifully.

Many of the outlaws who sprang out from the sheltering walls of the cabin where they had been in cover, and started in the charge toward the other one behind which Jack and his men were concealed, never reached their goal.

The revolvers in the hands of the self-created vigilants rattled like a watchman's rattle, and those at whom the bullets were aimed went down to rise no more.

But the others continued on their way, unmindful of the fate of their companions; unmindful of any fate save that of self, for each man knew beyond the peradventure of a doubt

that this was a combat, not for revenge, not for any purpose in particular, but one for extermination.

Each knew that the hardy westerners under the leadership of Jack Hawthorne were there to drive them from the neighborhood forever, and that they could expect no mercy but the rope if captured alive.

It was, therefore, to kill or to be killed, and naturally they preferred the active to the passive voice of that at best unpleasant verb.

Jack saw them coming, or rather knew that they were coming from the instant when the match came in contact with the thatched roof.

"At them, boys!" he cried, himself leading the way by springing out into full view and firing his revolvers rapidly.

What is especially strange in events of the kind I am relating is that the very best marksmen will inevitably shoot wild upon such occasions.

To say that one man fell to every ten shots fired will be to put a large estimate upon the fact, as every tried warrior will testify.

"There come the boys from the cabin!" cried Jack, suddenly. "Be careful not to hit any of our own men."

The warning was necessary, and was instantly heeded, which perhaps rendered the shooting even wilder than it would otherwise have been.

But Jack himself did not pause. While firing at the approaching men he was trying in vain to search out the person of Black Harry.

"Once get him out of the way and the gang is broken up," he thought.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XX.

A COILING SERPENT.

The rush which the outlaws made was not one to be stopped by the bullets or by anything short of an impassable barrier.

But such a barrier they found in Jack Hawthorne and his men.

The outlaws never stopped, it being their aim to fight their way through the enemy's lines and so reach the canyon, which a few of them could hold against an army.

Once there they could keep the others at bay until they were starved out and would be glad to make any terms in order to escape the terrible fate of starvation.

But they had miscalculated.

If Jack's men were fewer in numbers, they were greater in bravery and fighting prowess.

They held their ground as though they were rooted there, and that which but a moment before had been a battle with revolvers now became a hand-to-hand conflict, with the butts of weapons for clubs—with knives and even with fists.

A young outlaw about Jack's build fell to his share, and grappled with him before he had a chance to use any of his weapons.

They locked themselves together in old-fashioned wrestling style.

But the contest was of short duration.

While it might have been prolonged indefinitely, it was brought to a sudden termination by the advent of Sawed-off Sam, who had hopped into the midst of the melee and had at once espied how Jack was employed.

With a quick hop he was at his "boyee's" side, and in another instant the young outlaw was stretched upon the grass by a blow from the old fellow's revolver.

"All right, Jacksie!" he yelled, as he struck down the young hero's opponent. "Find another. I'll——"

But there he himself got a rap on the head which sent him whirling forward.

But he did not fall.

His old head was too hard to be cracked by a toy pistol, he afterwards remarked.

Staggering into an upright position, he saw the man who had dealt him the blow with his arm raised, ready to follow it up with another.

His favorite trick was again put into practice.

Dropping like a flash to the ground, his fist shot out and took the fellow squarely in the stomach.

Down he went, like a bullock stricken with an ax.

Instantly Sam was up and on him, and a couple of good resounding raps on the head quieted the outlaw effectually.

"Sawed-off's alive!" shouted the old borderman, in the ecstasy of the momentary excitement.

And truly he was alive.

Here, there, everywhere.

Now engaged in a most desperate hand-to-hand struggle with one of the foes.

Now breaking loose and going to the rescue of some one of his friends who was getting the worst of it.

Seemingly invulnerable, unconquerable.

But what of Jack, when Sam ended the struggle in which he had lately engaged?

He did not find another almost immediately.

All the while he had been striving to catch a glimpse of Black Harry.

But in vain.

He had come to the conclusion that the outlaw chief was even a greater coward than he had supposed him to be, when he suddenly saw him beyond the group of fighters, and just outside the circle of brightest light, skulking towards the cabin nearest to the canyon, evidently with the intention of making his escape.

Instantly Jack darted after him.

"The villain shall not escape me!" he muttered between his teeth as he sprang toward the outlaw chief. "I will have him yet!"

A few quick bounds served to overtake him.

Harry heard the sound of his quick approach and turned just in time to prepare himself for the onslaught.

Jack's revolvers were long since empty; his knife had been lost in the previous struggle.

Therefore, he was almost unarmed.

Not so with Black Harry.

Recognizing instantly with whom he had to do battle, realizing by some sort of intuition that Jack was unarmed, the outlaw raised his revolver and pointed it directly at Jack's heart.

"Halt!" he cried. "Throw up your hands or I'll bore you through and through."

But a halt was furthestest of anything from Jack's mind.

With a laugh of defiance he continued onward.

The outlaw chief, with a loud curse, pulled the trigger.

The pistol exploded, but the ball did not touch Jack's person. It went high over his head.

Something had flown through the air and had struck Black Harry on the wrist, knocking up his pistol just as he was about to fire.

What it was neither had time to turn to discover.

The fact was enough for both.

Jack knew that he was unharmed by the shot, while Black Harry thought with a muttered curse that the last load in his revolver had been wasted.

But these thoughts were instantaneous, for in the fraction of a second, Jack was upon the outlaw and they were tugging and straining together for the mastery.

Now one would be upon his knees and then the other.

Black Harry was the stronger, while Jack was the quicker, and had more science at his command.

Again in the midst of their struggles, something flew through the air.

Both felt it this time, and both instinctively shuddered, for both knew what it was.

That soft, serpent like touch could be given by nothing but a lasso.

But whose hand held the dreaded weapon?

Was it one of the outlaws, who, wounded and disabled likely, had crawled that far, and was seeking with his feeble strength to aid his chief?

Was it one of Jack's men in a like predicament, who was endeavoring to cast the noose about Black Harry's neck, but whose weakened arm was not sure of its aim.

Both men asked themselves these questions as they struggled on for the mastery.

Again and yet again as they strained to throw each other to the earth did they feel the soft yet stinging touch of the lariat.

Again and again it fell away from them to the earth, and was dragged away only to be again coiled for another attempt.

Once Jack felt that it almost dropped its noose over his head, but it fell away, nevertheless, harmless.

Both men realized that ere long the persistent lasso thrower would succeed in his design, and that one of them would be caught.

But which one?

They exerted themselves to the very last atom of their muscular powers, for the gliding motion of that hair rope as it touched them ever and anon and then fell harmless to the earth was horrible.

It was like battling in a den of serpents twining their slimy coils over them as they struggled.

With each new touch of the dreaded snake, they felt that the poisonous fangs would be buried deep into the quivering flesh of one of them.

But which one?

Again the lasso fell.

This time between them.

Black Harry tried in vain to grasp it with his teeth.

He hit savagely at it, but unavailingly.

It glided slowly away and again fell to the grass and they saw it not.

Great beads of perspiration stood out upon the outlaw's brow.

The moment had a horror for him which was terrible.

The superstitious dread which he had long felt for Jack Hawthorne was heightened almost to certainty by the gliding motion of the lasso that seemed to play around them with demoniac glee.

Jack, whose nerves were of the best, struggled on with the same intentness with which he had begun.

To him the lasso was either friend or foe, and whichever it might be would soon be determined.

Until it proved a foe he preferred to fight upon the hypothesis that it was a friend.

Indeed, several times he had fancied that the thrower could have dropped it over his head had he cared to do so, and as he had not, he began to hope that the noose was meant for Black Harry.

Suddenly our hero slipped.

His foot struck a projecting stone, and he tripped.

He tried to regain his balance, but in vain.

Black Harry saw the chance and improved it.

Throwing forward all his weight, with his left hand he partly raised himself, feeling in his belt with his other hand for his knife.

But as he raised himself that soft, whirring sound came again.

Black Harry dodged, but too late.

The noose fell and encircled his neck, and the next moment with a violent jerk he was pulled from off Jack prone upon the earth.

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW DIFFICULTY.

It was Black Harry and not Jack Hawthorne whom the unknown lasso-thrower was endeavoring to capture, and whom he had finally succeeded in noosing.

They both realized it now, for the outlaw chief was lying at full length upon the ground, with his face growing blacker and blacker each instant, his tongue protruding, and his hands clutching convulsively at the dreadful coil around his neck.

The instant when the outlaw was pulled from him, Jack sprang from his feet and bounded forward.

He was unhurt by the struggle, and as full of fight as ever.

Seizing the outlaw chief's empty revolver, he raised it and struck the man a resounding blow upon his head.

"There!" he exclaimed; "that will settle you for a time, not exactly fair, perhaps, but necessary, and I don't feel the slightest regret for striking such as you, even when you are down.

"Now for the lasso-thrower, that I may——"

He paused suddenly, for while speaking his eyes had discovered a prostrate body as quiet and still as that of Black Harry, lying but a few yards away.

More than that, he had recognized it.

It was Como!

With a cry of alarm, Jack hurried to Como's side.

He was lying on his back, and was, to all appearances, dead, except that his eyes were closed.

Dropping upon his knees, Jack placed his hand upon the Indian boy's heart.

Then he started up with a yet louder cry of wonder.

For a moment he was speechless. He did not know what to do.

"Alive, thank God!" he murmured presently. "But where is the wound? I must find it. I, and no other."

Again he bent low over Como.

"Ah!" he cried suddenly, "here it is. The right arm," and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Then gently raising the arm, he discovered that the bone was broken, for it hung limp and useless in his grasp.

"Poor Como!" murmured Jack. "Faint from loss of blood; scarcely able to move; the right arm broken and useless, the left had to serve to throw the lasso, and thus, Como, you saved my life.

"Brave Como—brave indeed! Braver than I had ever thought! Henceforth I will watch over you with better care than heretofore, and until you choose to tell me, you shall never know that I have discovered your secret.

"Now I know the explanation of many circumstances which have before seemed inexplicable.

"I will bind up the poor wounded arm as best I can while unconsciousness deadens the pain," he murmured on, and taking Como's handkerchief, together with his own, with them he made a rude, but nevertheless very good bandage.

Then whipping off his coat he took Black Harry's knife and cut away the skirt.

From that he made a sling for the wounded arm which he placed tenderly in it.

Just as the rather arduous task was completed Como opened his eyes.

They instantly fell upon Jack.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Como, breathlessly. "you are safe!"

"Yes, Como, safe and unharmed. You saved my life, and you are wounded. I have done up your arm as best I could."

"Then set Tom onto it. He's about ther best bloodhound I know, ef his smeller is a bit spiled by ter-dav's racket."

Without deigning to reply, Long Tom bent over and began examining the grass carefully for the trail.

Jack watched him eagerly, knowing full well that one could do that sort of work better than two.

Tom got upon his knees and spent several moments in examining the ground at the point where Jack had left Como lying.

Then he slowly made his way toward the point where Black Harry had been left so securely bound in the coils of the lasso.

Jack, watching, saw him pass beyond that point for a considerable distance, still creeping upon his hands and knees, and evidently entirely absorbed in what he saw.

At last, when he had traversed a considerable distance in that way, he paused and resumed an upright position.

Then, with the swaggering gait which seemed a part of him, he rejoined the others.

"Well?" said Jack, inquiringly, and with considerable impatience.

"Yer forgot suthin' when ye tied up the feller ye downed, didn't ye?" responded Long Tom.

"What was that?" asked Jack.

"Yer forgot ter gag him."

"I did not think it necessary to do so."

"Wal, ef ye'd ha' done it, they'd both be here now."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean thet both Black Harry an' thar young Injun war a lyin' in sorter hollers in ther ground——"

"I mean thet thar war one o' them critters wat grubbed with Harry, a goin' past over yonder whar ye saw me stop. Seein' as how the two here was a lyin' in hollers, he would not have seen them ef Harry hadn't been able to sing out.

"But he did sing out, and he probably recognized Harry's voice, cos he kim over an' let him loose.

"His trail turns short back thar an' makes for this pint.

"He let Harry loose, an' then they picked the Injun up atween 'em an' carried him off. D'ye see now wot I mean?"

Jack nodded, while Sawed-off Sam cried out in admiration:

"Wall, Tom, ef the cussed varmints did shoot off yer nose, they left yer smeller behind, didn't they?"

"Have you any idea where they would go?" asked Jack, breaking in before Long Tom could reply to the last remark.

"Yes," he said reflectively. "I think I know exactly where they hev gone."

"Where?" cried Jack.

"Hole on! Let's reason this ere thing out in proper shape.

"They couldn't hev gone very far, nor hev traveled very fast, could they?"

"Not very well—no!"

"So they couldn't expect ter git down ther canyon to ther hosses afore us, cos ef they knowed anything they knowed thet we'd be arter 'em like a streak es soon es we found out thet they'd skipped."

"Exactly!"

"Agin, they don't know thet I'm with ye, probably."

"Probably not."

"Consikently Black Harry an' t'other feller'll think thar ain't no danger o' any one a tellin' ye about ther cave."

"A cave?"

"Perzactly—a cave. That air trail 'll lead straight to a little cave in ther hill, further up ther canyon, an' so thar ain't no use in follerin' it, cos I kin go straight thar without no trail."

"But you may be mistaken."

"Nary a mistake! Don't I give you my reasons? It's ther only place whar they could hide around here, an' they're bound ter hide somewhere."

"Now, there's two of them, an' there is three of us—Sawed-off I don't count, an'——"

"Don't, eh? Wal, ye kin jes' bet yer sweet life thet in this

'ere emergency, I counts double, see?" broke in Sam with vehemence.

"That's when you count," said Long Tom dryly; "I was a countin' fur myself."

"Lead on, Tom, and take us to the cave; if they are there we will rout them out."

Without further words Tom started away at a rapid pace, while the others followed, Jack assisting Sam as best he could, as the old borderman insisted upon going.

They soon entered the canyon, and turning to the right made their way up to the other fork of it.

Suddenly, Long Tom paused.

"De'y see thet air bowlder?" he asked of Jack.

"Yes."

"Well, ther cave is just behind it, an' if them fellers mean biz, an' hev got the ammernition, it's no fule's job ter git 'em out."

"What do you suggest, Tom? You must take the lead now."

"Wal, ef ye say so, all right. Jest stay here then an' listen."

He started forward, keeping upon the side of the canyon opposite the bowlder he had indicated.

He remained upright in full view for some distance, until he had almost reached the bowlder.

Then he dropped first upon his knees, making his way along by creeping forward.

Then he sank still lower, and crawled until he reached the shelter of a large rock exactly opposite the huge bowlder.

Once more standing upright, he peered cautiously out.

Then raising his voice he shouted:

"Harry!"

A few moments of silence and then a gruff voice replied:

"Wot d'ye want!"

"I want ter come in," replied Tom.

"Wal, ye can't!"

"Why not?"

"'Cos I don't want ye. Ef ye show yer head I'll put a hole through it! I don't want ye, thet's w'y not!"

"Hev ye got the Injun with ye?"

"None o' yer biz."

"Wal, we want him!"

"Who's we?"

"Me an' Jack."

"Haw—haw—haw! Wal, me an' Jack come in an' take him if ye think ye kin."

"That's wot we're a-goin' ter do ef ye don't give him up!"

"Ye air, eh? So ye're a traitor, be ye? Gone clean back on me, eh? Wal, ye kin jist go back to yer friend Jack and tell 'em, with my compliments, that ef he wants ther Injun, ter come an' git him, only he'll find him dead when he gits here."

"Dead! Have you killed him?"

"No, I ain't, but I will, durned quick, ef you'n Jack don't light out o' this!"

Jack, who could hear all that was being said, started violently.

"Come an' take him ef ye wants ter," continued Black Harry, "only mind wat I tell ye, an' I ain't a foolin' either."

"Ef you fellers try ter git in here, I'll knife ther boy quicker'n a wink."

"I'll wait jest thirty minits fur ye ter light out. Ef ye ain't gone then, I'll cut off ther Injun's right ear and chuck it out to ye."

"At the end of thirty more, I'll serve the left one the same way."

"Arter thet, I'll wait an hour, an' ef ye ain't gone then, I'll finish him up an' then come out an' ye, fur ye've got me dead ter rights in here."

"Now ye know wat I'll do, an' I mean every word of it, too! I'll stick ter my text ef I hang the next minute—you hear me!"

"Remember, ef ye ain't gone in half an hour, off goes his right ear!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BARGAIN.

What to do in the emergency thus created Jack did not know.

To disobey the heartless command of Black Harry, and by remaining there passively submit to the mutilation and torture of Como, was horrible.

On the other hand, to leave Como helpless in the hands of such an unprincipled villain as the outlaw chief had proven himself to be was even more horrible, in the light of the information now possessed by Jack regarding the true character of the supposed Indian youth.

He did not feel that he had a right to reveal Como's secrets to the others, but he knew that he could depend upon them to stay with him to the very last gasp and fight for Como's liberty.

The minutes leading to the unpleasant calamity were ticking themselves away, and beads of cold sweat stood out on Jack's brow in the face of the perplexity before him.

Long Tom still held his position behind the rock, for the very good reason that to attempt to make his way back again to the others would have proved almost certain death to him, for the outlaw would surely see and fire upon him.

Jack turned to Sawed-off Sam.

"What shall we do?" he asked, and the agony he felt showed itself in his voice.

"Air ye bound to rescue ther Injun?" asked Sam.

"Yes, or leave my own bones to bleach here in the canyon."

"Thet settles it, boyees. We're bound to save him in thet case, cos yer bones wouldn't look good hyer, nohow. Ther next thing is ter figger out how we're agoin' ter do ther job."

"I leave it to you, Sam. Tom an' me uster hev a way o' telegraphin' ter each other. Ef he ain't forgot it, I kin talk with him es well whar he is, es though he war here."

After a moment's trial he succeeded in attracting Long Tom's attention, and then they began a series of pantomimic gestures not unlike the method employed by the deaf and dumb in communicating with each other.

They kept it up for several minutes, but finally desisted.

"Thar!" exclaimed Sawed-off Sam. "He kin try it anyway, an' mebby it'll work, an' mebby it won't."

"What is it, Sam?" asked Jack.

"Listen an' ye'll find out," replied the old borderman.

In another moment they heard Long Tom again calling to Black Harry.

"We've been a talkin' over wot ye said jest now."

"Well, how do you like it?"

"We don't like it, but we're agoin' ter stay jest the same."

"Ye air, eigh? Well, I might as well begin now, then, in ther ear-cuttin' biz."

"Yaas; but I've suthin' ter say fust."

"Fire away!"

"We're agoin' to stay here till you come out, an' when ye come, we'll sarve ye in jest ther same way 'as ye sarve ther Injun--ketch on?"

"I ain't a comin' out."

"Wal, then ye'll have ter either starve, 'r shoot yerself, cos we're agoin' ter wait."

"I'll shoot myself afore I'll let you fellows git hold of me, ye kin bet yer life onto thet!"

"All right, Harry; go ahead, an' when ye've done ther biz fur yerself, we'll come in an' git ye, an' sarve ye jest ther same

es though ye was alive, an' then cook wot's left of ye an' chuck it to the coyotes."

"That won't hurt me none," replied Black Harry, as dauntless as he could, and yet there was a very perceptible tremor in his voice, and Tom knew it.

"Mebby not," he continued; "only 'taint pleasant ter think on. How do you like it?"

"Ye don't mean to say that ye're a-goin' ter stay here an' let me cut off ther Injun's ears, do ye?"

"Thet's jest wot we mean, so's we kin hev ther pleasure o' cuttin' off yourn--ketch on?"

"What about my pard?"

"We're goin' ter sarve him the same way."

"Ye air, eh?"

"We air. But say!"

"Wot?"

"We're willin' ter let up ef you air."

"How?"

"Ef ye'll send ther boy Como out to us, an' he is all O. K.—no cuts about him; sound in wind an' limb in every particular, jest as soon es we're satisfied of it, you an' yer pard can kim out, too, an' vamoose jist as quick es ye've a mind to."

"'Thout bein' held up?"

"'Thout havin' a cussed word said to ye; 'thout bein' molested in any way. Ye kin both go scot free ef ye'll send ther boyee out to us first so's we kin see thet he's O. K."

"How do I know thet I kin b'lieve ye, eh?"

"Wal, jedgin' from yerself, ye don't, but ye'll hev to, 'r take the consekences."

"Ye'll stick to yer word, will ye?"

"We will."

"Well, hole on a minit till I see wat my pard sez."

"Right—but say!"

"Wat?"

"You an' your pard hev got ter light outen these diggins an' never kim back. Our promise'll keep good jest twenty-four hours, an' arter thet it'll be bad around here fur yer health—ketch on?"

The voices ceased and there lapsed a long interval of silence, during which none of the men spoke.

Everybody felt the anxiety which Jack strove hard to conceal, but which he but ill succeeded in doing.

At last all were startled by hearing Black Harry's voice from the cave shouting to Long Tom.

"Say," he said, "ef we'll agree to yer terms, so far es givin' up ther boy is concerned, will ye 'low us to keep him es far es the mouth o' ther canyon es a hostage?"

"No," replied Tom promptly. "You hev heard our terms an' they air all we've got ter offer. Take 'em or leave 'em as you've a mind ter."

"Wal, we accept then!"

"Oh, ye does, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then send the boy out so's we kin hev a look at him."

"All right, he's a-comin'."

Long Tom stepped out in full view and waited, and presently the figure of Como appeared walking slowly, and evidently in great pain caused by the wounded arm.

As soon as he reached Long Tom that kindhearted frontiersman stepped forward and said:

"Ain't got much gimp left in ye, hev ye? Arm busted, too. Jest sling yer good one around my neck an' I'll carry ye to the others."

Como was not slow to obey, and Long Tom quickly raised him from the ground.

"Air ye all right?" he asked. "Hev they hurt ye in any way?"

"No," replied Como in a weak voice, "they have been very careful of me."

"Ah!"

Tom said no more, but hurried with his burden to where Jack was eagerly awaiting them.

But the burden he carried grew limp in his arms, and when he put Como down, he saw that unconsciousness had become the result of the last few hours of hardship and suffering.

Jack hastened to a spring near by and brought water, with which he bathed Como's face, forcing a little between the white lips.

Presently a long sigh escaped the supposed Indian boy.

The brilliant black eyes opened wide with wonder, and looked around amazedly.

"Where am I," were the first words which escaped almost inaudibly from between the lips, now burning with fever.

"You are safe," said Jack, in reply, bending over still farther and whispering the words tenderly.

"Safe?" murmured Como, "safe from what? Why should I be safe when Jack is in danger?"

"But Jack is safe also. Don't you know me? I am Jack."

"No, you are not Jack; I do not know you. Jack is in danger—save him—save him—save him!!"

The last words ended in a loud cry, and as soon as they were uttered Como again lapsed into unconsciousness.

Jack had seen enough to know that a fever was imminent, and he knew that no time must be lost in rendering his charge as comfortable as possible.

To attempt to reach Wasp's Nest under the circumstances was out of the question. There was but one thing to do, and that was to hasten back to the mesa, make the remaining cabin as comfortable as possible, send a trusty messenger to Wasp's Nest for such remedies as could be obtained, and wait until Como could be moved.

But first he must have a word with Black Harry himself.

With hasty but decided steps, he passed up the canyon until he stood before the mouth of the cave.

Black Harry could have shot him down without mercy, but he did not fear.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

"Harry," he called, "I have one thing to say. We are going to leave here now, and in half an hour you must be gone. You will not be molested in departing, but if you ever set foot in No Man's Land again you will not live an hour. I am king here, and I mean what I say."

Turning without waiting for a reply he returned to the others.

Long Tom assisted him in carrying Como, while Sawed-off hobbled along behind, evidently in great pain.

The fourth one of the party was sent down the canyon to look out for the horses, which needed attention by that time, as well as to prevent Black Harry from making off with them.

The mesa was reached, and the entire party set to work rendering the adobe hut habitable, and it very soon presented the appearance of a hospital more than of an outlaw's camp.

Two of the men were dispatched to Wasp's Nest for necessities, and the rest settled down, feeling considerable satisfaction over the work they had done in breaking up the gang of outlaws.

Como was made comfortable in a farther corner of the hut, and there Jack was sitting, holding the little hand in his.

It was strange, he thought, that he had never noticed how small and delicate it was before, and he regretted many a harsh word he had spoken, and many a difficult task he had given the tender muscles to perform.

Suddenly Como's eyes opened and looked up at Jack, startled, somewhat wild; but full of understanding.

Consciousness had returned; the delirium had gone.

"Jack," she said (we will use the proper pronoun in referring to her now), "Jack, where am I?"

"Safe, Como, safe, thank God!"

"But why do you care so much about my fate, Jack?" she asked.

"Did I not always care, Como?"

"Yes, always; but you look differently now, somehow, Jack. Jack, do you know who I really am?"

Jack turned away his head before replying.

"No," he said truthfully, "I do not."

"But—but—Jack, you know that—that I am a—a——"

Jack interrupted her.

"Yes, Como," he said, "I know that you are not what you said you were; I know that you are not an Indian."

"Ah! but you know that I am not even a boy, do you not?" she asked gaining courage.

"I suspect it, Como; is it true?"

She lowered her eyes, and for reply said:

"Please do not tell the others. You shall hear my story as soon as I can tell it. Won't you let me be alone and think now?"

Our hero rose without a word, and left her side. Left her to think, as she had requested.

* * * * *

A month has passed; they are all back again at Wasp's Nest—in Jack's house.

Como's arm is nearly well, and in a couple of weeks more she can begin to use it again.

She still wears her male attire, and only Jack and Sawed-off know the truth concerning her.

Her story, as she told it to Jack, told more briefly was as follows:

Her father had made a fortune in cattle, and five years before had returned to the East to live.

There she had developed into a beautiful young lady, and being an heiress, was much sought after, for, being reared in the Southwest, she had become a young lady in society before her years warranted it.

But the development of her mind was precocious as well as her body, and when her father, who was a stern, hard man, sought to compel her to wed a man many years her senior she bitterly rebelled.

But she had no mother to whom she could fly for sympathy, and her father would not yield.

Suddenly she remembered a family of Apaches who had lived on the ranch with them in New Mexico, who were more than usually civilized and in whose hearts she knew she could find both affection and protection.

She flew to them and they were glad to receive her.

But there misfortune followed her, and in just a year from the time when she had joined them, she lost them.

An epidemic disease had deprived her of her friends.

Then she thought of disguising herself as a boy and seeking employment as such in some of the frontier towns; believing that she could conceal her femininity better as an Indian boy, besides, having learned the Apache tongue thoroughly, she adopted that disguise.

She had wandered as far as Wasps' Nest when the circumstances happened which united her with Jack's fortunes, and it is needless to say that she had learned to love him devotedly.

Jack could hardly describe his own feelings in the matter, until one day she said to him:

"Jack, in a short time I will be well, and I have been thinking that I must return to my father."

"What, go and leave me, Como?" said Jack, astonished.

"I must Jack, I cannot remain here—now."

"But why?"

"Because—because—I—can't."

"You shall remain, Como," cried Jack, vehemently; "you shall not go, or if you do I will go with you. I can't let you go away now, for I, who have never known any one of my own kind to love, love you, Como. Let us go together if you must. Go as my wife. We are young, but what does that matter since we know how to depend upon ourselves and upon each other. We will go East if you will, and then we will return here to our home. Shall it be so, Como?"

It is unnecessary to record her reply. It came from her heart and went straight to his.

A happy way out of the difficulty.

With Sawed-off Sam the way was not to be all smooth and even, henceforth, for the rough usage which his wound had received, and the lack of care during the trip to the foothills aggravated it to such an extent that the leg had to be amputated just above the knee.

"I'm sawed-off fur sartin," he said, when the job was done; "thar's no jokin' about it this time, but then I've found Jack an' he'll see me through till ther last deal goes 'round. He's my boyee, an' I'm ther only ole man he's got, so I guess we're squar. Then, thar's Como; he—no, she is a daisy, an' I guess ef I do hev ter stump it, it won't be very hard work an' so I'm satisfied."

He settled down at the house where Jack had made his home for so long, and became at once our hero's right hand man.

Long Tom invested in a few cattle and spent his time, when he was not roaming off somewhere, in smoking his pipe and watching them, and he never lost a chance of spending a day or two at Wasp's Nest in company with "thet air cussed critter wat war sawed off at both ends."

Black Harry had disappeared; nothing more was heard of him or his band of outlaws. Jack had made No Man's Land too hot for them, and they one and all know that if they should venture into the region again, short work would be made of them.

The wasps had lost their stings; the nest had become silent, and the people began to think seriously of giving the settlement a more high-sounding name.

Before departing on his trip to the East, Jack gleaned all the information from Sawed-off Sam that he possibly could regarding himself and his parentage. He jotted everything down, de-

termined upon thorough inquiry and research while upon his journey.

The old borderman was only too glad to give him all the information in his power, but it was very meager, and as Jack feared, he could find no traces of his family.

"I will never know who I am," he said to his wife (whom he still called by the name he had always known her by, Como), one day when they were on their way back to Wasps' Nest, after having visited and been forgiven by Como's father; "but, on the whole, I am rather glad than otherwise. I have my own destiny to map out—my own future to carve. There are no blots upon my family record; nothing for which to droop my head; no sorrow to bear for myself or for others; no ties to break. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

"You, Como, are my all. The affection which I would feel for a father, a mother, for sisters and for brothers, is all centered in you. Can you bear the burden, think you?"

She looked up at him with her lustrous eyes swimming in tears of happiness and joy.

"Oh, Jack," she said, "the roughest roads oftentimes lead to the pleasantest retreats, and it is so with me,"

* * * * *

Let us leave them in their home in Wasps' Nest, where any evening they can be seen seated upon the porch when the sun is setting, and near them always Sawed-off Sam, who is inordinately proud of his "guerrel an' boyee."

[THE END.]

Read "GUN-BOAT DICK; or, DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR," by Jas. C. Merritt, which will be the next number (178) of "Pluck and Luck."

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